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A Colourful Presence

An Analysis of the Evolution in the Representation of Women in Iranian Cinema since the 1990s

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Doctor of Philosophy

Film Studies

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in honor of my loving parents.....

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that the work herein is my own and has not been submitted in candidature for any other degree, postgraduate diploma, or professional qualification.

Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the change in the representation of women in Iranian cinema since the 1990s and investigates the motives behind it by looking at the overall history of Iranian cinema and those active in its production. Iranian cinema, both before and after the Islamic Revolution, has been closely watched by the ruling powers and one way or another has been utilized to relay messages that comply with the dominant order. But this has not completely shut down all the efforts of the filmmakers striving to convey a more meaningful message.

The Iranian cinema industry has been the arena of an elite intellectual group of people; only following the 1979 Revolution and the “legitimization of cinema” by the Islamic order did it become a widely accessible industry to the general public, who tended to ignore or oppose it prior to the Islamic Revolution. This thesis pays close attention to the changing roles of women in film production and representation. Although aspects of women’s lives become stricter after the Revolution, it is in this period—from the late 1980s into the 1990s—that women for the first time took a prominent role both behind and in front of the camera. This dissertation argues that such shifts are due to “factionalism” within the Islamic Republic, shifts internal to the film industry and the emergence of a group of highly educated film production teams, in addition to the variety of ways in which women were able to exercise more agency in the film industry. One trope around which this shift occurs is that of the “veil” as a technique and metaphor for social practice in representation.

Employing feminist film theory tools, a number of representative female-centric films from this period are analyzed, focusing on their cultural, political, and cinematic contexts. Examining the films with respect to the representation of women, the research relies on textual analysis as its basic methodology. Along with the textual analysis, interviews conducted with filmmakers and people active in the industry also help to map the films in the socio-political context in which they were produced.

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A Note on Transliteration and Style

For transliteration from Persian, the full range of vowels is used: a (but no macron for alef), e, i, o, u; and the diphthongs “ow” (as in Nowruz). ‘Ain (except initially) and hamzeh have been retained and distinguished. Proper and personal names, wherever possible, are given in conventional forms.

Film titles are always at least in the first instance given in Persian and in English along with the date, but from the second time only the English title is used. Where there is more than one English translation, this thesis has used the English title that is given in the International Movie Data Base (IMDB).

Introduction

Overview of the Thesis

The HSBC ad from their “Unlocking the world’s potential” campaign in 2010 interestingly demonstrates the position of female directors in Iran, which created uproar in North American media. There are many discussions on the factoid used in an HSBC ad (“Only 4% of American films are made by women. In Iran it’s 25%”), which this study does not enter into, but among the different responses, Eli Clifton, in a blog in response to the negative reactions, argues that this ad “did not imply that women in Iran are ‘better situated’ than American women[...]. [D]istort[ing] the text of the ad shows

total lack of empathy for challenges that Iranian female filmmakers have overcome to hold an astonishing 25% of the filmmaking market.”¹



Figure 1 HSBC ad from “Unlocking the world’s potential” campaign in 2010

Examining the evolution of the representation of women in Iranian cinema, this thesis will analyze the overall shift in representation since the early 1990s — an especially significant turning point — and investigate the motives behind it. This evident shift in the films under exploration presents the basis of this study and raise the questions of why and how it came to realization at this point in time. Demonstrating the change in the representation of women, this study also discusses the role of women in Iranian cinema, both behind and in front of the camera, and offers an overview of changes and developments throughout the history of Iranian cinema. This thesis highlights several specific films as a tool for tracing undercurrents of evolutions in Iranian society, culture, and politics, with a particular focus on the representation of

¹ Undermining such challenges that Clifton mentions was exactly my point of departure and it is what calls for this study. The shift in the representation of women in films since the 1990s has not been free of challenges, and both female and male directors are responsible for achieving the more nuanced representation of women in films, either by overcoming the existing obstacles or by finding new ways of depicting the reality perceived onscreen.

Iranian women's lives. I believe films reflect the society they are made in, even as they work as catalysts for change.

Tracing the change in the representation of women in Iranian cinema is like examining the journey of a woman into self-realization. This journey then is divided into four stages, setting off from the idealistic representation of women as either good or bad, to the belief in the symbolic holy figure of an utterly "good" woman, to women who make mistakes and are subjected to hardship in society, the same way men are, to women who are striving for independence and freedom. It is a journey from a woman who is silenced by society or by what society expects from her to a woman with agency who has a voice.

The development of these four stages depicts the evolution of women's status and conditions of existence in the past 60 years. This struggle women have gone through is demonstrated in films selected from throughout the history of Iranian cinema. Women's lives have often been conceived in films in Iran; at times this alternate reality depicts a more passive character, at other times a more active character. I argue that the rise towards the peak of the change in the representation of women in cinema starts in the late 1980s through the early 1990s, which coincides with the entrance of female filmmakers in the feature film industry. Looking back, this thesis also finds some missing links, the overlooked institutions, from the 1960s onwards that perhaps aided in the prominence of the Iranian film industry after the revolution, which then helped to open the field to female filmmakers in the late 1980s.

Nine representative films are selected from the period under study and are analyzed individually in Chapters 4 through 6, focusing on their cultural aesthetics and political and cinematic contexts. The shift in the representation of women is evident in almost all the films produced since the 1990s, although this shift is more clearly evident in some films than others. This thesis argues that the main factors that helped to shift the screen persona of the Iranian female subject were due, first, to the continuous evolution of the Iranian film industry, and second, to the increase of women's agency in society in general, and in the film industry in particular.

This notion of agency that guides my analysis of the representation of women in Iranian cinema throughout this thesis is in line with Saba Mahmood's definition of agency, which is understood not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination,

but a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create[...]. Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as a capacity to realize one's own interest against the weight of customs, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective). Thus, the humanistic desire for autonomy and self-expression constitute a substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit.²

This thesis therefore looks at the relationship between the patriarchal society and the female subjects not only as a situation of power relations, where an external power dominates or defines the subject's ability to act or the choices she makes, but also as a

² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

kind of power that “forms the conditions of its possibility.” Thus female agency is not defined exclusively through women’s sense of resistance to the dominant power but also through the “conditions it permits them.” As Mahmood asserts further, “...we might think of agency not only as the capacity for progressive change but as, importantly, the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist.”³

Although the scholarship on Iranian cinema is by now both ample and valuable, certain areas call for further and deeper analysis. This thesis builds on the already rich existing studies on Iranian cinema and helps to situate Iranian cinema within the larger field of film studies. This thesis provides close readings of a selection of films among which there are well known and internationally acclaimed films, as well as films that are critically acclaimed in Iran but have not necessarily made it to the international scene. With this juxtaposition this study seeks to establish a shift in the entire Iranian film industry, not just to demonstrate a trend unique to a certain group of films. To show this widespread change and select the most representative films, this study has divided the directors into three categories: first, critically acclaimed female directors; second, critically acclaimed directors whose careers date back to before the revolution; and third, critically acclaimed directors who started their careers after the revolution. The latter category will be referred to as the new generation of filmmakers throughout this thesis. Covering the period between the late 1980s through 2008, all the films selected contain female-centric narratives.

³ Saba Mahmood “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival.” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, No. 2 (2001): 217.

In 1979, The Islamic Republic of Iran replaced the Pahlavi monarchy following an Islamic revolution — a revolution that in many respects shook Iranian society to its foundations. This great historical juncture has often been utilized in various studies of Iranian culture to understand the changes that followed it. This particular study is not denying the importance and effect of this new order; instead, it tries to look at the bigger picture beyond the revolution to find elements of continuity that has been originated before and despite the change.

Iranian cinema, with a history almost as long as the history of cinema itself, has developed an excellent reputation internationally over the past four decades. This international reception has made Iranian cinema the subject of study of many scholars. Although the resulting scholarship is very valuable and has helped to inform this research project, it falls short in two ways. First, with the exception of a few very valuable overviews of Iranian cinema⁴ that very briefly introduce a wide range of films made in Iran, the subject of many of these studies are only the select films that have reached international festivals, and are therefore not representative of the larger body of films made in Iran annually and of the Iranian film industry as a whole. Second, as mentioned earlier, very similar to some historical or political studies of Iranian subjects, the 1979 Islamic revolution has often been looked at as the definitive breakpoint with regard to Iranian cinema. As a result, these scholarly works have overlooked some of

⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso, 2001) ; Mohammad Ali Issari, *Cinema in Iran, 1900-1979* (Metuchen; London: Scarecrow, 1989); Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (International Library of Iranian Studies. London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

the ongoing changes that are not the direct result of the revolution per se, although the revolution may have accelerated them or helped them gain more prominence. Although Iranian cinema did not produce any films from 1979 for about three years until after the immediate post-revolution purges in the film industry and the associated changes in the structure of the film industry (and although after its revival many new talents joined the film industry) this still does not mean that cinema after the revolution was standing entirely on a set of new pillars.

This thesis also argues that one of the reasons the shift in the representation of women occurred is due to change within the institution of Iranian cinema over the years, which made it possible for female directors to enter the feature filmmaking arena in the late 1980s. Chapter 2 (“An Institutional History of Iranian Cinema”) adapts a Historical Institutionalist approach to explore the development of different independent institutions alongside mainstream cinema that may have aided in the revival of Iranian cinema after the revolution. This chapter briefly looks at the institution of Iranian cinema since the 1960s and sheds light on some significant developments alongside mainstream cinema, which (to my surprise) have made very little appearance in the scholarly discussions on Iranian cinema, although their significance is obvious to people involved in the industry. This chapter also employs empirical information obtained through interviews with certain directors and industry members, along with secondary sources.

In order to justify the change in the portrayal of women in Iranian films, Chapter

3 (“Captive Bodies Lost in Oblivion”) offers an overview of the history of Iranian cinema with respect to the representation of women. Stage one of the four stages discussed through the selected films belongs to the films made before the revolution and in the first decade after the revolution. In those films, the “good” woman character is pure, chaste, and untouched. She is defined by her relation to and protection of a man — a father, husband, or even a son. Chapter 3 presents a historical and sociopolitical overview of Iranian cinema through the close examination of three films, two of which are among the best films produced before the revolution by two of the most prominent Iranian directors: Masud Kimiai’s *Gheysar* and Bahram Baizai’s *Ragbar (Downfall)*. The third film is Ali Zhekan’s *Madian (The Mare)* from 1986, which works like a bridge between the films made before and after it. While it gives a more nuanced representation of the female characters in the first half of the film, it concludes following the same predetermined patriarchal codes that the earlier films followed. At the end, similar to the films before it, the dominant patriarchy takes over and the women are the losers. These textual readings with discussion of historical and sociopolitical changes, along with discussion of the shift in the institution of Iranian cinema, will set the foundation for my argument that each of these factors contributed to the change that is mapped in the representation of women in the subsequent chapters.

In the films discussed in “Captive Bodies Lost in Oblivion,” the women are either good or bad and fallen — there is no in between — and the fallen women characters do not receive the same protection or prejudice as the good women. In pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, there are usually some cabaret scenes with song and

dance, included purely for entertainment (sometimes these scenes are not even an integral part of the plot). It is in these scenes that the fallen women are portrayed and the double standard is evident. For example, in a typical sequence in many films from the *film farsi* genre the protagonist, showing off his honour by being protective of his *namus* (“honour,” which is defined through the behaviour of his female relations), seeing another man give his female relation (usually a fiancée or sister) a bad (lustful) look or uses bad language or starts a fight; while usually in a later scene he himself is depicted at a cabaret enjoy watching the “fallen” woman’s performance, finding no wrong in it because she is already lost, not thinking that *she* is also someone’s sister or daughter. There are also many films whose plots centre on a protagonist who falls in love with a “fallen” woman, takes her in and marries her, thereby saving her. In other words, a woman’s value is determined only through her relation with a man, the model of an absolute patriarchal society. This is akin to Laura Mulvey’s discussion of the function of “marriage” as narrative closure. The “marriage” function in both *Gheisar* and *Ragbar* is similar to what Mulvey says about *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1947):

The presence of the female character in the centre [...] allows the story to be actually, overtly, about sexuality: it becomes a melodrama. It is as though the narrational lens had zoomed in and opened up the neat function ‘marriage’ (‘and they lived happily...’) to ask ‘what next?’ and to focus on the figure of the princess, waiting in the wings for her one moment of importance, to ask ‘what does she want?’ Here we find the generic terrain for melodrama, in its woman-oriented

strand.⁵

The “what does she want?” question is what separates *Ragbar* from any of the other films made in that period. In summary, marriage and motherhood are two of the main subjects of the films made both before the Islamic revolution and in the first decade after the revolution. Although after the revolution the “fallen” women characters were completely written out of the narratives, the idealistic portrayal of the “good” women makes the films not so different from the films made before the revolution.

After this period, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, women entered the stage of awareness. In real life women had lent a big hand to the revolution and had been struggling to keep their new social status ever since. As is discussed in Chapter 2, on the institution of Iranian cinema, the environment of the late 1980s was finally receptive to this shift and the first female directors started making feature films, soon after focusing their lens more directly on female subjects. Chapter 4, “Woken up with a Patriarchal Hangover,” looks at the works of the first three female directors: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Poursan Derakhshandeh, and Tahmineh Milani. Their bodies of work are very strongly marked by their lives and personalities, as well as their particular directing styles. These films are grouped together because they are among the first examples of women-centric films in Iran that are also produced by female filmmakers. Interviews offering insight into how these filmmakers work and how they develop their stories were conducted with all three directors, and these supplement my analysis. This chapter

⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946)” in *Feminist Film Theory*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 122-130.

offers a close reading of their works, focusing especially on one very significant work each that best demonstrates their cinematic authorship. At this stage, women were still living under the pressure of the same social values around gendered behaviour as before, but they started voicing their opinions. They were still dealing with issues of marriage and motherhood, but they no longer did so silently and passively. In these films, women no longer stand in the peripheries: this is the first time they take center stage.

The 1991 film *Nargess* by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad is, as I argue, the point of departure of this shift in the representation of women in Iranian cinema. *Nargess* is the first film that Bani-Etemad both wrote and directed. Coming from more than a decade of experience in documentary filmmaking, Bani-Etemad uses her experience in creating social dramas, retelling true stories and connecting with the audience from under the skin of society. *Nargess* marks a beginning in her career of a series of female-centered films, securing a place for her as one of the auteur directors of Iranian cinema.

This chapter also presents *Parandeye Koochak-e Khoshbakhti* (*The Little Bird of Happiness*, 1988), by Pouran Derakhshandeh, the first Iranian female director. Derakhshandeh's second feature film, *The Little Bird of Happiness* both represents the style of this director in full and it is her first female-centered narrative. Although not all of her films have female protagonists, they always have strong female secondary characters, which were rarely seen in earlier films. She also comes from a career of making social documentaries; one of the main subjects she portrays is disability and the

issue of identity, both of which are well presented throughout the aforementioned film.

From Tahmineh Milani, the film *Vakonesh-e Panjum* (*The Fifth Reaction*, 2003) is chosen as an example from the peak of her career. This chapter also examines her first film, *Bachehay-e Talagh* (*Children of Divorce*, 1989), to both demonstrate her authorship and also situate her work and progress within the discussion of this thesis. Unlike the other two directors, Milani started her film career after the revolution and is the one female director who admits she works towards a better and fuller representation of women's characters. To paraphrase her own words, she hopes her films help educate the women and men watching them.

It is worth noting that the number of female directors in Iran has been growing fast since the above-mentioned female directors started their feature-filmmaking careers. There are now many other critically acclaimed directors, such as Samira Makhmalbaf, who has become the youngest director in the world to be included in the official selection of the 1998 Cannes Film Festival with her film *Sib* (*The Apple*). The aforementioned directors have been included in this study because of their pioneering efforts in changing the modes of representation of women in films. Not mentioning the other prominent female directors is not to undermine their effect on Iranian cinema, but rather is due to the necessary limits of this study and the decision to present a wide selection of films and their respective filmmakers, representing the vast range of genres in Iranian cinema.

In the next stage, women achieved momentum due to some kind of difficult situation, e.g. war or economic hardship. Not only were women no longer just passive supporters of their men, but they had also become forces of life themselves — alongside their men or in their absence. Because the men were at war or simply because they were unable to support their families on their own, women's roles became more significant and they helped equally in shaping the family's future. Chapter 5, "Contingent Presences: Little Strangers in the Land of Patriarchy," presents female-centric films from three prominent male directors. This chapter demonstrates that the change in the representation of women in Iranian cinema is a phenomenon that is evident throughout the entire Iranian film industry, and is not unique only to a specific group of films, although the presence may be more evident in some films than others. Two of these directors are already mentioned in Chapter 3: Dariush Mehrjui and Bahram Beizai, two of the most prominent directors of Iranian cinema. Both Bahram Beizai and Dariush Mehrjui are from the group of filmmakers who started their careers in the 1960s and have made great contributions to Iranian cinema both before and after the revolution. Bahram Beizai's work, as it is discussed in Chapter 2, has been consistently portraying women in a different light to that of the majority of films produced at the same time, and he represents a fuller image of the female characters in his films. This chapter presents a close reading of one of his most famous films, *Bashu Gharibeye Kuchak* (*Bashu, A Little Stranger*, 1986).

In 1969, Dariush Mehrjui made *Gav* (*The Cow*), arguably the most important film of the pre-revolutionary era, but he never made a female-centric film until after the

1990s. *Sara* (1993), the first of Mehrjui's three films made in the 1990s focusing on prominent female characters, is discussed in detail in this chapter. The third film in this group is by Ebrahim Hatamikia, one of the most prominent directors of the war genre. Due to its focus on a female subject, it is quite significant to the overall argument of this thesis. The war cinema of the 1980s, which is introduced briefly in Chapter 3, only dealt with the topic of war from an idealistic viewpoint; consequently, in most cases this cinema genre portrayed women only as devoted wives and mothers waiting patiently on the homefront. But Hatamikia's films since the 1990s have changed the whole war genre discourse in Iranian cinema. His films started a dialogue for the first time about the war, and in many cases criticized the war and its outcomes. However, following the end of the Iran-Iraq war, there was no longer a need or rationale to portray the warfront, so instead he started dealing with the homefront. In all the films dealt with in this chapter, the female characters prove their ability to run the family independently — although not yet by choice.

Finally, this journey into realization reaches its final stop: women seeking more agency. Women who put everything on the line when their families were in need, like the characters in Chapter 5, found that after the hardships ended, they were not rewarded the positions they deserved, and thus they started to further question patriarchal values. As a result, it seems women have become rebels. They are seen to have achieved so much confidence that not only do they no longer need the presence of a man to define them, but they have also become strong enough that they are not afraid to break free and assume independent lives on their own. Chapter 6, "Girls Gone Wise:

Women, Rebellion, and Liberation,” presents a group of films that depict the already changed attitude in portraying women in Iranian cinema. This chapter examines a film by the most internationally acclaimed Iranian director, Abbas Kiarostami, whose most famous films are quite lyrical and deal with simple stories. Named the father of Iranian neorealist cinema, his films usually either did not have any female protagonists, or women characters only played a small part in them. But his film *Dah (Ten)*, (2001), which launched a new era in his filmmaking, is the opposite, very openly discussing important gender issues and taboos in an Iranian woman’s life. Coming a long way from what is depicted in, for example, the film *Nargess*, this film even portrays a female prostitute who is not necessarily victimized in the classical way. The other two films in this chapter are from relatively younger directors. Asghar Farhadi started his career as a director in 2003 and always depicts strong female subjects in his films. Although not his most acclaimed, I will discuss one of his earlier films, *Chaharshanbeh Suri (Fireworks Wednesday)*, (2006), in this chapter. I believe this film sets the direction of his career quite well, as he has directed two other films since then that have won him Berlin’s Golden Bear and other prestigious awards.

The last film in this chapter is Reza Mirkarimi’s *Be Hamin Sadegi (As Simple as That)*, (2008), a simple film about one day in a housewife’s life. This is a rather surprising and challenging film by this director; the interview conducted with him reveals great insight into how and why he felt it necessary to portray such a story. All the females in these films are portrayed as independent women who would actively confront the

common patriarchal society, questioning its necessity, and would leave their husbands and ask for a divorce.

This thesis compares and traces shifts in the representation of women in these films in comparison with films made before the Islamic revolution and films made in the first decade after the revolution in relation to changes in Iranian society. Informed by feminist film theories and considering the unique social and political situations dominant in Iranian media production, this thesis analyzes the content of these films. Examining films with respect to the representation of women, the research relies on textual analysis as its basic methodology. In addition to this, interviews were conducted with filmmakers and people active in the industry, which also helps to map the films in the sociopolitical context in which they were produced.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Discussion of the Existing Scholarship on Iranian Cinema

Scholarly writing on post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is ample; much of it has emerged from within the fields of anthropology, sociology, and Iranian Studies,⁶ while works coming from the field of film studies are somewhat belated. Although there are a handful of book chapters and journal articles that deliberately seek to theorize the cinematic processes of Iranian films,⁷ the major thrust of this work has been to situate

⁶ See, for example, Nasrin Rahimieh, "Framing Iran: A Contrapuntal Reading of Two Cinematic Representations of Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Edebiyat*, no.9 (1998): 249-275; Nasrin Rahimieh, "Marking Gender and Difference in the Myth of a Nation: Bashu, a Post-Revolutionary Iranian Film," *Thamyris* 3, no. 2 (1996): 261-277; Roxanne Varzi, "A Ghost in the Machine: The Cinema of the Iranian Sacred Defence" in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Michael M.J. Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷ See, for example, Negar Mottahedeh, "New Iranian Cinema" in *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer and Steven Jay Schneider (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); Negar Mottahedeh, "'Life Is Color!' Toward a Transnational Feminist Analysis of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh*," *Signs*, no. 30 (2004): 1403-1428; Negar Mottahedeh, "Bahram Beizai's *Maybe ... Some Other Time*: The Un-Present-Able Iran," *Camera Obscura* 43, vol. 15, no. 1 (2000): 163-191; Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, "The open image: poetic realism and the New Iranian Cinema" in *Screening World Cinema*, ed. Catherine Grant and Annette Kuhn (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) 163-181; Lindsey Moore, "Women in a Widening Frame: (Cross-)Cultural Projection, Spectatorship, and Iranian Cinema," *Camera Obscura* 59, vol. 20, no. 2 (2005): 1-33; Hamid Naficy,

films and filmmakers within the post-revolutionary social, political, and religious context.

There are a few valuable short studies on some aspects of women and representation in Iranian cinema, such as Shahla Lahiji's article "*Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979*,"⁸ which this study employs and builds on, and there are also some more focused studies on topics like motherhood, such as Nasrin Rahimiye's "Marking gender and difference in the myth of a nation: *Bashu*: a post-revolutionary Iranian film"⁹ and Roxanne Varzi's "Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War."¹⁰

Although there is still no one comprehensive book on the history of Iranian cinema, there are a few valuable books that this study has employed as a starting point. Among these is Hamid Dabashi's *Close Up: Iranian Cinema*, published in 2001,¹¹ in which Dabashi offers a discussion on Iranian cinema from its inception to the recent years. The title of this book is an homage to Kiarostami's film *Close Up* — a fantastic film about a man who pretends to be Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of the greatest Iranian directors of the post-revolutionary era. While this book gives a review of some of the most important titles ever made in Iran, there is a personal side to the way everything is

"Veiled vision/powerful presences: women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema" in *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: National Film Theatre, 1999).

⁸ Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979." In *New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002) 215.

⁹ Rahimiye, "Marking gender and difference in the myth of a nation"

¹⁰ Roxanne Varzi, "Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War" *Feminist Review*, No. 88 (2008): 86-98.

¹¹ Dabashi, *Close up*.

presented, making it on the one hand accessible to the reader, while on the other hand perhaps too subjective at points. He introduces Iranian cinema as a medium of escapism as well as a medium for the sense of rebellion in the Iranian subjects. Cinema, in his words, was used both as a form of propaganda by the Shah and as a vehicle for expressing transgressive desires among the younger generations, which led to the shift in the filmic discourse in the late 1960s. Looking at the works of some of the most prominent filmmakers in the history of Iranian cinema, this book also examines an emancipated national identity in the making and the dreams of the Iranian people to defy censorship and overcome the difficulties facing the modern world. Dabashi characterizes cinema by its aestheticism permeated with poetic sensibilities rooted in Iranian culture and inspired by such amazing cinemas as the Italian Neo-realism and the French New Wave.

One of the most comprehensive anthologies on Iranian cinema is Richard Tapper's collection of articles under the title *The New Iranian Cinema*, published in 2002.¹² Some of the best-argued articles on Iranian cinema are contained in this collection, which opens with a comprehensive introduction and overview by the editor, Richard Tapper, on the history and evolution of Iranian cinema. The articles are written mostly by Iranian intellectuals and scholars, and cover themes such as the Islamization of cinema, the issue of censorship, social problems, and the realism and aesthetics of Iranian cinema. This book contributes much to a greater political and cultural understanding of the New Iranian cinema of the post-revolutionary years.

¹² Richard Tapper, ed., *The New Iranian cinema politics, representation and identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

Hamid Reza Sadr's *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, originally written in Persian and published in English in 2006 is a valuable source on Iranian cinema. In this book, film critic Hamid Reza Sadr undertakes the ambitious task of writing a comprehensive history of the "political, economic, and social factors"¹³ that have shaped the course of Iranian filmmaking. The book is most useful for its thorough coverage of the Iranian film industry before the emergence of the New Wave in the 1970s and its flowering in the 1990s. However, what it lacks is the more artistically sophisticated reading of the films of recent years. The book is organized chronologically; each chapter covers a decade or two and is divided into thematic subsections. Sadr's book provides a useful survey of the complex history of Iranian cinema, from mediocre obscurity to worldwide prominence. Sadr's critical method, which is not atypical of Iranian film critics in general, is sometimes heavy-handed in its execution, and at times lacks the academic tone. Nevertheless, he provides one of the fullest accounts of the history of Iranian cinema in English, and it does offer a starting point for more theoretically sophisticated studies.

Among the texts available in Persian, *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran: az aghaz ta sal-i 1357* (*History Iranian Cinema: From the Beginning to the Year 1979*)¹⁴ by historian Masud Mehrabi, published in 2007 in Tehran, provides a good reference to the history of Iranian cinema. This book offers a good chronological overview of the Iranian film industry before the revolution, but it works best as a reference that has combined the information on Iranian cinema gathered through many newspaper articles and magazine

¹³ Sadr, *Iranian cinema*, 3.

¹⁴ Masoud Mehrabi, *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran: az aghaz ta sal-i 1357* (Tehran: Entesharat-e-Film, 1984).

cut-outs and other primary sources. All the information provided is quite raw, and for the most part an analytical discussion is missing. The information in this book regarding the pre-revolutionary Iranian film industry is quite thorough, although some of the institutions discussed here in Chapter 3 either make very little appearance or are not mentioned at all.

In recent years, there have been several books published presenting a more focused study of different aspects of Iranian cinema, adding to the already abundant scholarship on Iranian cinema. The major thrust of these works has been to situate films and filmmakers within the post-revolutionary social, political, and religious contexts, explaining how state censorship has limited the filmmakers in representing different subjects.

Among these more recent books is Negar Mottahedeh's *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, published in 2008.¹⁵ Mottahedeh starts by focusing on censorship and the neverending question of realism in Iranian cinema, but moves beyond the endless web of discussions on the difficulties of representational authenticity manifested in the necessity of women's veiling. Although she asks her reader to "abandon the comparative practices that read films ethnographically,"¹⁶ especially when it comes to representation of gender, and while she condemns the fetishistic, touristic reception of Iranian cinema by western critics and festival audiences, she still does not widen her horizon beyond the films that are most familiar to those western audiences.

¹⁵ Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced allegories: post-revolutionary Iranian cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Ibid, 149.

She looks at the works of the three most-seen and discussed Iranian filmmakers outside Iran: Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Bahram Beizai. In addition, she claims a new “filmic grammar” is revealed through close analysis of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, which, in order to be true, requires a thorough analysis and study of a much wider selection of films. Although her effort in placing Iranian cinema within the greater field of film studies is quite valuable, her thesis lacks enough evidence and at times lacks enough definition; for instance, she goes on to say that this new “filmic grammar” that Iranian cinema has introduced disrupts and violates many of the narrative conventions of “dominant cinema”; but how this new language — which is not entirely defined — does that is never answered.

Nacim Pak-Shiraz’s *Shi’i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film*, published in 2010, gives a detailed description of the rise of Islam in the region and the establishment of the Islamic republic, portraying how the clergy moved from religious institution to political dominance in Iran.¹⁷ Once cinema was accepted as not necessarily being in opposition with Islamic thought, despite it being seen as a Western tool, Iran’s film industry grew and eventually established the controversial and contested term *Sinama-ye ma’nagra*, meaning reflective cinema, or, as it is roughly translated, “Spiritual Cinema.” Films that do not fit this vague paradigm are therefore deemed unworthy of public consumption. Many filmmakers have been forced to work in the realm of metaphor and allegory in order to produce films that can question or

¹⁷ Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi’i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

deny the divinity of the Islamic code. Although this has resulted in some fantastically multi-layered work, it has also meant that films are always measured against this idea of “pure” or “impure.” This is such an epically scaled subject that Pak-Shiraz has set to tackle, it almost feels there is not going to be enough space to address everything; however, interestingly, what seemed impossible at the beginning is by the end less of an issue. She gives enough examples, and invites the reader into the interpretations and debates.

Generic Quality of “The New Iranian Cinema”

While addressing the issue of selective study on Iranian cinema, this study would like to draw attention to the need for scholars to move a step back and look at the whole body of Iranian cinema, not just a fraction of it. Iranian cinema, throughout its long and flourishing history, has obtained a very special stance among world cinema. This position is verified not only by Iranian cinema’s international reception, but also by the abundance of scholarly studies on it over the past few years. Despite the relatively large number of studies on Iranian cinema, there is still a need for an inclusive study defining and redefining the filmic genres of Iranian cinema. In most of these scholarly studies, only a fraction of Iranian films are represented.

The blanket term *New Iranian cinema*, which is often used to describe Iranian cinema, is so widely used that it almost portrays Iranian cinema and its entire body of films to the general public as a cinema with a single genre. Before discussing the

generic qualities of *New Iranian cinema*, I would also like to point out that although *Iranian New Wave* and *New Iranian cinema* are meant to describe different eras and groups of films in the history of Iranian cinema, there are available texts that use them interchangeably, which creates even more confusion.¹⁸ Although the difference between these two terms is probably obvious to more trained readers, it may not be so obvious to the less experienced. *Iranian New Wave*, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a term distinguishing ground-breaking films such as Mehrjui's *The Cow*, Kimiai's *Gheisar*, and Beizai's *Downpour*, produced towards the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. *New Iranian cinema* is a term given to a group of films that enjoyed international acclaim in the late 1980s and 1990s, the best examples of which would be works by Abbas Kiarostami (*Koker Trilogy*, 1987/1992/1994, *Taste of Cherry*, 1997) and Majid Majidi (*Children of Heaven*, 1997, *Colour of Paradise*, 1999). Both of these terms loosely make connections with the French New Wave and Italian Neorealism, which represent the first attempts at defining genres in Iranian cinema. Bill Nichols, in explaining *New Iranian cinema*, says it has distinguished techniques in creating narratives, using inferential storytelling, wide shots, long takes, and minimal use of edit, dialogue, and music. "The result," he says, "is distinct from all four modes of film production suggested by David Bordwell: Iranian cinema departs from the Hollywood emphasis on linear, casual plot development and its axes of sex and violence, adventure and romance."¹⁹ The term *New Iranian cinema* can not be maintained as arguably the only

¹⁸ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*; Tapper, *The New Iranian Cinema*.

¹⁹ Bill Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit," *Film Quarterly* 47 (1994): 20.

well known filmic genre of Iranian cinema. This term cannot even be given to all those films that continue to find audiences in international settings. In recent years, more diverse types of Iranian films have been given the chance to appear on international screens, and this fact, more than ever before, calls for a more meticulous categorizing of Iranian cinema into different, more specific, filmic genres.

Robert Stam has argued that genre analysis is plagued with a number of problems, specifically identifying four key problems with generic labels in relation to film: the first is the *extension* of the filmic genre, its broadness and narrowness of the labels. Second is the fear of *normativism*, having preconceived ideas of what the genre can do rather than seeing the genre, in Stam's words, as a trampoline for creativity and innovation. Third is recognizing genre as a monolithic definition, as if a film can only belong to one genre. Forth is *biologism*, a kind of essentialism in which genres are seen as evolving through a standardized life cycle.²⁰ Reflecting these problems onto the concept of *New Iranian cinema*, it can be seen that it is too broad, including a great number of films. It is also somewhat normative: it has created a preconceived notion that ultimately guided all the films that were given a chance to leave the domestic setting and be presented in an international setting. It can also be argued that this preconceived notion was also employed by some of the young filmmakers in Iran over the past two decades to create films that were worthy of reaching the international arenas, making films which were catered solely for an international audience. Perhaps the life cycle of *New Iranian cinema* has also ended, but it can always serve as a

²⁰ Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. Print, 2000) 128-129.

stylistic reference for films that are made at later dates. One can also acknowledge the dynamic fluidity of genres without positing the final demise of a genre as an interpretive framework. As the generic corpus will always expand, genres and the relationships between them also change over time; the conventions of each genre shift, new genres and sub-genres emerge, and others are “discontinued.”

As in literature, painting, and other forms of art, “genre became a critical term, providing another conceptual framework for understanding movies.”²¹ Therefore, film classification by genre is the logical continuation of genre classification in literature. On this matter Rick Altman writes, “In many ways, the study of film genre is no more than an extension of literary genre study [...]. Clearly, much that is said about film genre is simply borrowed from a long tradition (from Aristotle to Roland Barthes) of literary genre criticism.”²² Although there may be certain universal genres introduced in literature to organize the entire literary corpus, in contemporary media genre tends to relate to more specific forms than the universal forms such as tragedy and comedy. Nowadays, films are classified in publicly available media such as newspapers and TV listings as “horror,” “western,” and so on: genres and terms that any adult is familiar with in our modern society. Perhaps that is what needed to be done for Iranian cinema, and to have it compared to the classical and contemporary Iranian literary works.

²¹ Barry K. Grant, ed., *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism* (Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1977), 1.

²² Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 13.

Defining genres may be problematic, but even if theorists were to abandon the concept, in everyday life people would continue to categorize texts. As Andrew Tudor puts it, “It becomes almost the end point of the critical process to fit a film into such a category [...]. To call a film a ‘Western’ is thought of as somehow saying something interesting or important about it.”²³ Rick Altman calls this approach to genre criticism the “semantic” approach — a focus on the more superficial aspects of films that fit into a given genre. A semantic examination would point out the character types, aesthetics, plot lines, etc., that are common to the films. Besides listing the obvious similarities and differences in films, to be valuable genre analysis must also bring deeper issues to the surface. This is when Altman’s second type of examination comes into play: the “syntactic” approach. The syntactic approach takes into account the relationships between the semantic elements of the genre, or between those elements and aspects of society at large. Distinguishing between semantic and syntactic approaches to genre can be difficult, since there is general disagreement on the exact frontier separating semantic from syntactic views; it is possible as a whole to distinguish between semantic elements, meaning the generic definitions that depend on a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like, and syntactic definitions that instead play up a certain constitutive relationship between undesignated and variable placeholders. As Altman notes, the semantic approach thus stresses the genre’s building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged.²⁴

²³ Andrew Tudor, “Genre.” In *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Barry K. Grant (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 16–23.

²⁴ Altman, *Film/Genre*, 10.

It is also considered to be best to use a dual approach, which allows for a far more accurate description of the numerous inter-generic connections typically suppressed by single-minded approaches.

For example, employing a dual approach analysis on Iranian cinema, looking at the group of films typically known as children films, we can see that a lot of these films have chosen a young adult character as their protagonist who is one way or another fighting life's hardships; this kind of characterization would stem from a semantic observation. A syntactic observation can also be made by pointing out the similarity between poverty and hardship of the weak and innocent young adults on screen with the "little" man in the audience who can identify with the protagonist's hardship and think, if that little guy can fight his way out of the trouble, why can't he? As Karen Kury, who also looks at the films categorized under the genre of *New Iranian Cinema*, argues, "Children (presumably as naïve, innocent, incomplete citizens) can provide a useful cover for a social critique that might otherwise be seen as too controversial. The child here is understood as a version of Lauren Berlant's conception of the 'infantile citizen' whose 'stubborn naiveté gives her/him enormous power to unsettle, expose, and reframe the machinery of national life.'"²⁵

Agreeing with Matt McDowell, in the context of this deeper, broader method of analysis, the genre criticism can be very useful. As he explains, "Qualities or incidences

²⁵ Karen Kury, "Children in an open world: Mobility as ontology in New Iranian and Turkish cinema." *Feminist Theory* 11 (2010): 285.

that seem insignificant in individual films can take on more meaning when connected with similar characteristics of other films in the genre [...]. So while the semantic approach is necessary, it is a means to an end — the end being the syntactic analysis which can then be taken up, and which can tell us something about the societies in which the films are produced and consumed.”²⁶

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak explains, “Relevance is a central concept in many discussions of the modern literature of Iran [...]. Basically, it postulates that [...] a poem, a play, or a story ought in some way to relate demonstrably to the society in which it is produced. As a result, no discussion of a literary text — be it native or foreign — escapes the need to pronounce on that relationship.”²⁷ Using Altman’s Semantic/Syntactic approach and the concept of relevance, which Hakkak suggests for Iranian modern literature, it would also be possible to look at the entire corpus of Iranian cinema and categorize it into various genres. This classification should be done by looking at all the films produced in Iran annually. I place emphasize on the entirety of Iranian cinema, because genre division should not be confined to only a segment of films produced in Iran; in other words, it is time to break away from only presenting the worthwhile or perhaps the art-house films. Robert Stam explains, “While some genres are based on story content (the war film), others are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or other media (the musical). Some are performer-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on artistic status

²⁶ Matt McDowall. “What Choice? Subculture Films, Naturalization, and the Postmodern Condition.” <https://people.creighton.edu/~mlm22940/subculture/index.html>. Accessed in Jan 9, 2011.

²⁷ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, “Introduction: Iran’s Literature 1977-1997.” *Iranian Studies* 30, No. 3-4 (1997): 4.

(the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), locat[ion] (the Western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema).”²⁸ Although there has been a great amount of study on Iranian cinema, a lot of the studies fall short on presenting the whole body of works made in Iran. A call for such an anthology should bring to light both the short-lived and perhaps purely entertaining films, as well as those timeless and perhaps everlasting art-house films that don’t only speak to the culture they are produced in but are easily accessible to the entire world. In order to distinguish and place a text in its relevant genre, there should be close attention paid to the relationship of the film and its environment. As it was discussed, it is common to use the already existing genres to identify the various genres in Iranian cinema, but those already existing genres in other cinemas should only be used as a starting point and not as a pre-moulded model, which may perhaps force us to ignore some films that don’t fit in any of the categories, rather than remoulding the pre-existing model to fit the films under study. With regards to the blanket categorization of the literary works of Iran after the revolution, Hakkak states that he would like “to see at least as much emphasis placed on their variety as on their shared topical qualities. While containing an identifiable core, a tangled series of shared signs that mark them as the literature of Iran in the last two decades of the twentieth century, these texts remain forever open both to the linguistic and cultural tradition that has made them possible and to future readings.”²⁹

As previously stated, cinema has inherited a habit of categorizing artworks into types from its sister arts, such as literature and painting. The question of genre in

²⁸ Stam, *Film Theory*, 14.

²⁹ Karimi-Hakkak, “Introduction: Iran’s Literature 1977-1997,” 5.

cinema has been raised with regards to European films and Hollywood films from the early years of film theory. As Robert Stam argues, as with the literary genres, filmic genres are influenced by social and historical factors. Cinematic categories have been defined with corollaries located within the entire course of Western literature. It is often the case that these defined genres are applied to other, non-Western, cinemas, since many of these terminologies are purported to be universal. However, as Jane Feuer notes, “A genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world.”³⁰ Therefore, all those universal elements, depending on the social and historical background that the film is made in, can be changed, because, as John Hartley notes, “the same text can belong to different genres in different countries or times.”³¹ While creating the different genre categories of Iranian cinema is beyond the scope of this study, this section hopes to raise awareness that there is a need for such endeavours. This study is also not trying to suggest that there is only one good way of classifying Iranian cinema into various genres; it is instead hoping to portray the need for such analysis and suggest a way that could be a good starting point for identifying those various existing genres in Iranian cinema.

³⁰ Jane Feuer, “Genre study and television” In *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C Allen (London: Routledge, 1992), 144.

³¹ Tim O'Sullivan, John Hartley, Danny Saunders, Martin Montgomery and John Fiske, *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 129.

Theoretical Perspective

Feminist film theory has been a topic of interest for over thirty years. While many of the discussions dating back to the early years of feminist film theory are still alive, much of the discourse has shifted or expanded in focus. The early feminist film theories typically addressed issues affecting white women and largely focused on Hollywood cinema, while the more recent works predominantly address issues for women of colour and other minorities.³² Early feminist works necessitated focusing only on women, or, to use Simone de Beauvoir's terminology, "the second sex," in an attempt to situate women more visibly in their patriarchal society. But feminism, both as academic endeavour and as activism, has come a long way; as Ann Kaplan observes: "[I]n fact, the changes in the relation of women to film over the past three decades are such that many no longer consider it necessary to single out female artists for special consideration."³³

In principle I agree with the idea that any work of art should be considered on its artistic merits despite the gender of the artist. However, with respect to the research topic of this thesis, I believe there is still the need to devote separate targeted attention to the contribution of Iranian women to filmmaking. This approach was employed in the

³² See E. Ann Kaplan, "Women, Film, Resistance: Changing Paradigms" in *Women Filmmakers Refocusing*, ed. Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis and Valerie Raoul (New York: Routledge, 2003).

³³ See Ibid., 15.

early years of feminist film theory, when general neglect towards female subjects meant, for any study, making women the centre of attention — or in other words, putting them on the map, and this was considered positive progress. But Iranian female subjects are still in that stage where their very roles in society need to be recognized and highlighted.

Iranian women have been particularly active over the past thirty years, despite the fact that many aspects of women's lives changed after the Islamic revolution, which in many cases resulted in further oppression of women in Iran, or at least resulted in curtailment of their choices and activities. Yet a blanket judgment of “oppression,” which is often used when addressing Middle Eastern subjects, especially women, results in under-representing or misrepresenting women who have been working very hard to change their position within society. Highlighting change in the representation of women in Iranian cinema, which I believe is partly due to the increase in the number of female directors in Iran, calls for this special focus on female contributors to Iranian cinema.

Although there is a considerable amount of literature on Iranian cinema, the more nuanced and detailed study of different aspects of Iranian cinema is still in its infancy, especially considering issues of gender and representation. This thesis follows in the footsteps of a long trail of scholars who produced the feminist film scholarship known today, but uses Iranian films rather than Hollywood films as its case study. There are many similarities and parallels between Hollywood cinema of the 1930s to

the 1960s and Iranian cinema after the revolution. Drawing attention to some of these parallels, I will situate my research and approach within the larger spectrum of film studies. The goal of this thesis is not to single women out into a separate category of study, but to demonstrate their critical importance to the development of cinema in Iran by highlighting their particular contributions.

Having set out a perspective on the study of Iranian cinema with regards to the question of genre, here I go on to offer a theoretical review that situates my research within the larger spectrum of film studies. This thesis also employs a historical approach. This kind of multidisciplinary approach is not uncommon to film studies, particularly in the study of world cinema and third cinema. Ann Kaplan, in explaining the shift in feminist discourse over the years, asserts: “[...] what ‘feminism’ can mean in any historical period depends upon the specific constraints within which women lived and worked.”³⁴ Therefore it is not possible to examine cultural outputs — specific and crucial, such as films — without considering those “constraints” within which women lived and worked. Although this thesis is not about feminism in Iran, it does employ feminist tools to analyze the changes in Iranian cinema with regards to women; this is not possible without considering sociopolitical and historical changes in the society over the years in which the films were produced. I also find it appropriate to apply the same tools that were applied to Hollywood cinema in the 1970s to Iranian cinema, instead of just applying what feminist film theory offers now after decades of development and influence on Western cinema. It may be inappropriate now that female filmmakers are

³⁴ Ibid., 15.

being acknowledged alongside their male counterparts to single them out in female-only discussions in the West, but that approach was first utilized in the late 1970s and 1980s, and helped to accelerate women's visibility in different fields; therefore I argue that women in Iranian cinema still deserve the same attention if scholarship is to give them the same critical visibility.

When studying a national cinema, cultural, historical, social, and political backgrounds also need to be reviewed in order to better understand the modes of representation unique to that national cinema. This approach is acutely relevant in the case of Iranian cinema, as it has undergone much turbulence since its inception. The most notable juncture in recent history is the Islamic revolution in 1979, which, on the surface, has led Iranian cinema in a very different direction than the path it was taking before the revolution. Yet change is of a continuous nature, despite the appearance of historical ruptures. Changes occur over time, and, although historically significant events such as a revolution are fixed in time by being given a date of occurrence, even a revolution does not happen overnight. Therefore, any changes associated with the revolution should also be considered to have occurred over a certain amount of time. With respect to Iranian cinema, although the revolution marks a very significant start to the evolution in the structure of the Iranian film industry, we should still consider that some ongoing changes may have had their roots planted in the decades prior to the revolution. Not everything that comes after the revolution can be explained based on the revolution alone. Thus, my historical analysis considers the period starting in the 1960s, the time most notably acknowledged as the birth of a new Iranian cinema, continues

through the 1970s and early 1980s, after the revolution, and then focuses on the 1990s, the reform era following Mohammad Khatami's gaining the presidency.

Feminist critics have been concerned with the sexual objectification of women in films and the set portrayals of women in circumscribed gendered roles, such as being a wife and mother. With regard to the representation of women, theorists of film have been influenced by feminist theoretical discourse more generally, as well as by contemporary British cultural studies theorists. Many feminist film critics such as Mary Ann Doane and Molly Haskell employed a theoretical position, similar to that of contemporary critical theorists such as Stuart Hall, arguing that media exhibit images that assist in sustaining and reinforcing society's hierarchical status quo.³⁵ Also, as Robert Stam states, bourgeois ideology "[a]s defined by Lenin, Althusser, and Gramsci [...] is that ideology generated by class society through which the dominant class comes to provide the general conceptual framework for a society's members, thus furthering the economic and political interests of that class."³⁶ Representation also tends to replicate the dominant-subordinate relations of power that exist between men and women in society at large. This is so because, as Mulvey suggests, "the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and structures of looking."³⁷

³⁵ Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 41-57.; Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973); Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Hutchinson, 1980); Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (London: Sage, 1997).

³⁶ Stam, *Film Theory*, 133.

³⁷ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 25.

Understanding the relation between feminist thought and film studies is essential, as this thesis considers the place of female directors within the Iranian film industry as well as the representation of women in films. The second wave of feminist movements beginning in the 1960s spurred a different set of approaches to looking at films in a gender-sensitive way. In search of a meaningful theory, film scholars employed feminist theories, while feminist media criticism arose from “the daily, ongoing concerns of women re-evaluating the culture in which they had been socialized and educated.”³⁸ The results and achievements of these critical approaches are what constitute feminist film theory today.

As Kaplan explains, while by the 1970s, in fields other than cinema, there was a body of feminist-inspired research and emerging women’s studies programs and curricula, work on women in films was mainly left to the critics.³⁹ The film critics looked at the roles of women portrayed in Hollywood films as being marginalized, subordinated, and oppressed. They criticized the Hollywood studio system for cultivating the social and cultural archetypes of the good wife and mother. Post-World War II films encouraged women to give up their newfound roles in society, relinquish

³⁸ E. Ann Kaplan, *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Methuen & Co., 1983), 23; E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

³⁹ E. Ann Kaplan, “Popcorn Venus: Analyzing the Fantasy.” Jump Cut Web <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC03folder/PopcornVenusKaplan.html>. Accessed Jan 9, 2011.

their jobs to the returning GIs, and return to their homes and kitchens to take care of their families.⁴⁰

While most of this work was based on Euro/American experience, the outcome for women after World War II and after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 is somewhat comparable. In both situations, the burden on women in society increased during adverse times. During World War II, if women, abandoned by men going to war, had not taken up the productive roles, society could not have run as before. In Iran, women were called upon to take part in the revolutionary movements, and, as witnesses to the revolution recall, “In those days you didn’t feel there was a difference between men and women; they walked next to one another shoulder to shoulder.”⁴¹ This transition in the roles of women in Iranian society was acknowledged by Ayatollah Khomeini in his speeches, where he described how “The ladies [...] [come] out and into the political scene alongside, or rather ahead of, the men.”⁴² In the aftermaths of both World War II and the Iranian revolution, despite the fact that the role of women in society had evolved during a national crisis, in both cases leaders in society would have preferred that women returned back to the roles they held previously. However, this did not transpire. As mentioned earlier, to map the change in the representation of women in Iranian cinema, this thesis analyzes Iranian films in the same light Hollywood films of

⁴⁰ Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus* (New York: Avon, 1973).

⁴¹ Tahmineh Milani, Personal Interview. August 2008. Tehran, Iran.

⁴² The role of women in the victory of the Islamic revolution: 12 July 1980 (21 Tir 1359 AHS), Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project, <http://www.al-islam.org/position-women-viewpoint-imam-khomeini/5.htm>. Accessed Jan 9, 2011.

1950s were analyzed. Parallels will be drawn in comparing the controlling bodies driving the Hollywood film industry and the Iranian film industry after the revolution.

Earlier feminist media critics adapted a sociological approach in looking at the representation of women in films and other forms of arts. They evaluated the gender roles in terms of positive or negative representations. But later, in the 1970s, having seen the limitations of their early approach, they modified their method towards inclusion of semiological and psychoanalytic perspectives, and focused on how meaning was produced in films, rather than concentrating on their exhibited content.⁴³

Early film critics focused on the representation of women in particular film genres and of stereotypes as reflections of how society viewed women. For example, Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies* (1973)⁴⁴ analyzed the portrayal of women based on the gender stereotypes that were depicted, particularly how actively or passively they were depicted and the amount of screen time they were given. Molly Haskell's early work aimed to make the depiction of women more "realistic." Increased female presence in film was therefore seen as a positive step towards the goal. During these early years, film critics continued to be influenced by European and North American second-wave feminists such as Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet, and Simone de Beauvoir, with their various critiques of the oppression of the female gender. Two feminist film journals gained prominence during the 1970s, *Women and Film* (more recently renamed as *Camera Obscura*) and *Jump*

⁴³ Kaplan, *Women & Film*.

⁴⁴ Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*.

Cut. Feminist debates were also hosted in such important journals as *Screen* and *Cahiers du Cinema*.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Borrowing Freudian psychoanalytic theory to examine the gaze of the spectator and how it interprets the female body has formed a large body of literature within feminist film theory. Many feminist film critics have focused on a psychoanalytic concept referred to as the “male gaze,” which is discussed frequently in relationship to classical Hollywood films. This concept can be traced back to Christian Metz,⁴⁵ who argued that viewing film is only possible through scopophilia — the pleasure of looking, related to voyeurism, originating from the male perspective. Budd Boetticher offers a compelling description of the male gaze: “What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, which makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.”⁴⁶

Advancing this approach, feminist film criticism began to take on a more theoretical tone in the 1970s. In these early years of feminist scholarship, theory and methods were primarily based upon the structuralism of Barthes and Saussure, the post-

⁴⁵ Christian Metz, “The Imaginary Signifier.” *Screen* 16, Summer 1975, 14-76.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 63.

structuralism of Foucault and the psychoanalysis of Lacan. Guided by Barthes' structural theories, Claire Johnston, one of the pioneers of feminist film theory, in her 1973 essay "Notes on Women's Cinema," expanded concepts of female cinematic stereotypes to include larger structural ideological components of iconography and myths to be used as a methodological means of examining how cinema works and how we can best interrogate and expose the workings of ideology.⁴⁷ In Mulvey's words, psychoanalytic film theory argues "that mass culture can be interpreted symptomatically, and that it functions as a massive screen on which collective fantasy, anxiety, fear, and their effects can be projected."⁴⁸

This perspective contends that conventional narrative films in the classical Hollywood tradition not only tend to focus on a male protagonist in the narrative, but also assume a male spectator. Added to this theory by Laura Mulvey's famous essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," was the feminist claim that men and women are differentially positioned by cinema: men as subjects who drive the film's narrative forward, women as objects for masculine desire and fetishistic gazing. Mulvey assumed a general picture of cinema as a symbolic medium, using Lacanian psychoanalysis to ground her principles of gendered subjectivity, desire, and visual pleasure — a view stemming from a particular and highly contested philosophical tradition.

⁴⁷ Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," in *Feminist Film theory, A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 32.

⁴⁸ Mulvey, *Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"* 127.

Mulvey's theory argues that traditional films present men as active, controlling subjects and treat women as passive objects of desire for men in both the story and in the audience, while not allowing women to be desiring sexual subjects in their own right. Mulvey claims that such films objectify women in relation to "the controlling male gaze" presenting "spectacle" and man as "bearer of the look." Men do the looking; women are there to be *looked at*. In Mulvey's view, the cinematic codes of popular films are obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego.⁴⁹

Mulvey's work has generated considerable controversy amongst film theorists, many questioning the alignment of passivity with femininity and activity with masculinity and its failure to account for the female spectator. Ann Kaplan argues that the "gaze" could be adopted by both male and female subjects, and that the male is not always the controlling subject, nor is the female always the passive object.⁵⁰ Teresa de Lauretis also argues that the female spectator does not simply adopt a masculine spectator position but is always involved with both the passive and active subject positions.⁵¹

A key objection has been that Mulvey's argument in her original article was essentialist in that it tended to treat both spectatorship and maleness as homogeneous essences, assuming that there was only one kind of spectator (male) and one kind of masculinity (heterosexual). There is the possibility of more than just "masculine" or

⁴⁹ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 23-27.

⁵⁰ Kaplan, *Women & Film*.

⁵¹ Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

“feminine” spectator positions; for example, there are also queer spectators. Steve Neale identified the gaze of mainstream cinema in the Hollywood tradition as not only male but also heterosexual. He observes a voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze directed by some male characters at other male characters within the text.⁵²

Foucault related the “inspecting gaze” to power rather than to gender in his discussion of surveillance.⁵³ B. Ruby Rich argues that women’s relationships with film are instead dialectical, consciously filtering the images and messages they receive through cinema and reprocessing them to convey their own meanings. The resulting “theory” in feminist film theory raises some compelling questions concerning issues such as the justification of a specifically feminist theory for adopting the patriarchal theory of psychoanalysis, since it is not supported by empirical data, and the evidence that is supplied appears to be circular in nature.⁵⁴

Janet Bergstrom, in *Enunciation and Sexual Difference*, references Sigmund Freud’s ideas of bisexual responses, arguing that women are capable of identifying with male characters and men with female characters, either successively or simultaneously.⁵⁵ Miriam Hanson, in *Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino*

⁵² Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle,” in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. John Caughie, Annette Kuhn, and Mandy Merck (London: Routledge, 1992), 277-287.

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

⁵⁴ B. Ruby Rich, “In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism,” in *Feminist Film Theory, A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 41-47.

⁵⁵ Janet Bergstrom, “Enunciation and Sexual Difference,” in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (London: Routledge, 1988), 159-185.

and Female Spectatorship, suggests that women are also able to view male characters as erotic objects of desire.⁵⁶

In response to these and other criticisms, Mulvey in 1981 revisits the topic in her “Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” When addressing the heterosexual female spectator, she modifies her stance to argue that women can take two possible roles in relation to film: a masochistic identification with the female object of desire, which is ultimately self-defeating, or a transsexual identification with men as the active viewers of the text.⁵⁷ The second position Mulvey considers for female spectator is quite interesting with regard to the Iranian films in question, and it is further explored at the end of this chapter. This “transsexual identification with men” is dictated to the Iranian audience, as cinema is considered public space regardless of the subject matter, and therefore subjects are portrayed with having at least one male spectator in mind at all times.

Claire Johnston (1979) presented the idea that women’s cinema can function as “counter cinema.” Through consciousness of the means of production and opposition of sexist ideologies, films made by women have the potential to posit an alternative to traditional Hollywood films. In reaction to this article, many female filmmakers have integrated “alternative forms and experimental techniques” to “encourage audiences to

⁵⁶ Miriam Hanson, “Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship,” in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 259-282.

⁵⁷ Mulvey, *Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,”* 122-130.

critique the seemingly transparent images on the screen and to question the manipulative techniques of filming and editing.”⁵⁸

The Averted Look

After the revolution, Iranian cinema, alongside everything else in society, had to be attuned to be on par with Islamic belief and thought as interpreted and disseminated by the new regime. In fact, this transformation is most evident in the film industry, and the cinema culture in general. Cinema was believed to be a Western tool that brought with it more corruption than morality, and was widely contested by the general public, whose religious outlooks were now more voiced in public and more dominant in the public sphere. Cinema’s fate was decided early on after the commencement of the Islamic Republic. In one of his first speeches after his return to the country, Ayatollah Khomeini famously talked about how cinema could be employed for education and could be stripped of the entire negativity it was associated with, but only through rigorous supervision.⁵⁹

Hamid Naficy, one of the pioneer scholars in the field of Iranian studies and Iranian cinema in particular, in writing about the films in the first decade after the revolution in the late 1980s, coined the term “averted look” with respect to Iranian

⁵⁸ Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema,” 31-40.

⁵⁹ Khomeini qtd. in Richard Tapper, “Introduction.” In *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London ; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 6.

cinema.⁶⁰ Employing the concept of the gaze and applying the Shiite Islamic doctrine with regard to the rule of looking, *ahkame negah kardan* (the commandments of looking) to the cinema after the revolution, he characterized the “look” offered by Iranian cinema as an “averted look.” “The commandments of looking” dictates that men and women unrelated (according to the ayatollahs’ reading of the Qur’an and other religious sources) should not look at each other directly and with lust. Naficy argues that it motivates and promotes a more pleasurable looking. Borrowing from the position of voyeur in the gaze theory, he asserts that veiling together with the system of the looking “hide aspects of women (and of men, to some extent) and thereby create the necessary distance that motivates and promotes pleasurable looking and listening.”⁶¹ He called it the “averted look” because, in reality, “the commandments of looking” led to an indirect averted look; many people avoid looking at one another directly, but, as Naficy observes, it instead led to an unnoticed or voyeuristic look: “A person draws pleasure by listening to or viewing a scene that he or she is not supposed to be privy to. To be sure, walls and veils segregate people, but they are not hermetic in this. Indeed, they tend to invite curiosity and promote pleasure through voyeurism and eavesdropping.”

He explains three suppositions for the Islamic commandments of looking and the semiotic of veiling in Iran:

⁶⁰ Hamid Naficy, “The Averted Gaze in Iranian Postrevolutionary Cinema.” *Public Culture* Spring 3, 1991, 29-40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

First [...] Eyes are active, even invasive organs, whose gaze is also construed to be inherently aggressive. Second, women's sexuality is thought to be so excessive and powerful that if it is uncontained or if it is allowed unhampered visual gaze through the gaze (unveiled), it is supposed to lead inevitably to the wholesale moral corruption of men and of society as a whole. Third, men are considered to be nothing but weaklings in the face of women's powerful sexual force, and the effect of looking on the men is clearly posited to be direct and unmediated.

The Shiite Islamic reading of the gaze, as explained by Naficy, stipulates that "it is the owner of the look who is most affected by his own look at another (this owner is usually thought to be male and the object of his look female) because of men's inherent weakness when it comes to sexual temptation." Therefore, men through their gaze at an unveiled woman (a sexual subject) become corrupted and "humiliated."⁶² Through the "averted look" he explains that the "look" is distorted with voyeuristic desires and anxieties of the looker. And "[a]s in Zizek's formulation of the 'awry look,'⁶³ one can claim that the 'averted look' produces understandings that are clearer and more distinctive than those produced by the direct gaze."⁶⁴

Thus, Naficy couples Mulvey's pleasurable-looking theory, which is most evident in the voyeuristic gaze of a male at a female subject, with Zizek's concept of "looking awry," which explains that there is more pleasure in the hidden rather than the visible, and comes up with the concept of the "averted look" in Iranian cinema. The Islamic Republic of Iran implemented the codes of modesty in the motion picture

⁶² Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presence," 131-151.

⁶³ Slavoj Zizek, "Looking Awry." *MIT press* 51, October 1990, 34.

⁶⁴ Naficy, "The Averted Gaze in Iranian Postrevolutionary Cinema," 35.

industry in order to seek a way to create a less corrupt industry — or, in other words, to create an industry that does not offer sexuality on display and treats women with more respect.⁶⁵ Based on Naficy's argument, they have failed miserably, instead creating a more sexually charged cinema. Using Žižek's example of a pornographic film, because of its objective camera it leaves nothing to the viewer's imagination and "shows it all"; it is the viewer that is the sexual slave of the actors on screen. Žižek argues that the actors in a pornographic film always look directly at the camera (meaning the viewer), and therefore it is the audience that is the subject of their gaze, and not vice versa.⁶⁶ On the contrary, in Iranian films after the revolution, as Naficy contends, women and their sexuality are concealed, and even close-ups are avoided in many cases, leading the audience to take the position of the voyeur, therefore sexualizing the subjects further.

Most of the films made in the early 1980s — as evidenced in the films that are included in this study from this time — perhaps can fit into the "averted look" theory; in most of these films women are structurally absent, no close-ups of the women are shown, and shots of men and women looking at each other directly are avoided. Naficy concludes his thought with:

If the figure of the female is a threat to the male, as some feminist theorists posit, in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema it is disavowed or coopted not by fetishism but by voyeurism [...]. Despite this broad improvement, it must be pointed out that if the social role of women in the film industry has become distinctive and clearer, the image of women on the screen still remains fraught with ideological,

⁶⁵ Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presence," 131.

⁶⁶ Žižek, "Looking Awry," 34.

theoretical, and psychological ambiguities and doubling as it is overcharged and encoded with both desire and aversion.⁶⁷

Perhaps the theory of the “averted look” is true for some of the early films made after the revolution, but not for all the early films, and it certainly does not hold for all films made in Iran since. There are several reasons for this. First, the theory appears to be based on an Islamic ideology for which there is yet no evidence demonstrating its full application to Iranian society, let alone the film industry. This is only seen to be fully carried out in formal situations in public governmental organizations, which is normal: upon meeting a woman, instead of shaking hands and looking at each other, the man puts his right hand on his chest and bends out of respect while keeping his gaze to the floor (whether the same man would look at women when they are not looking is not clear to us, as perhaps Naficy’s argument suggests). And despite the Islamic revolution, the individuals in the film industry are not necessarily amongst the most religious Iranians; some scholars may even go as far as calling the film industry a secular institution.⁶⁸

Second, the evidence that was used to support the theory is the fact that those early films lacked close-ups of the female characters and that the direct gaze between the male and female characters was avoided on screen. Looking back, it is no surprise that the early films lacked female characters structurally altogether in their narratives, as most of the female characters in films from before the revolution had been deemed the

⁶⁷ Naficy, “The Averted Gaze in Iranian Postrevolutionary Cinema,” 39.

⁶⁸ Dabashi, *Close Up*.

essence of corruption, vice, and prostitution. During the purges in the early years after the revolution, the film stars took most of the hit, along with many filmmakers and other people who had to say goodbye to their careers in the industry. As a result, after the revolution, those who managed to stay and continue working, or even those who had just started their careers, had to be cautious in proceeding and addressing this issue. As Milani puts it, in the early years no one knew what was accepted and what was not accepted, and to just be sure and avoid the hassle of going through the strict censorship, many avoided making films with central female characters.⁶⁹ One telling example portraying the path that Iranian filmmakers took thereafter is one of the most seen and talked-about shots (Figure 2) from the film *Bashu, The Little Stranger* by Bahram Baizai, shot in 1985/6, held from screen until 1990. As evidenced in the screen capture, Baizai has created an extreme close-up of the main character's eyes using her veil, the white scarf, as a frame within the film frame. Since her eyes are not framed by the film frame, technically that makes this shot not an extreme close-up. Therefore he circumvents the issue of the unacceptable close-up by using a frame within the frame.

⁶⁹ Milani, Personal Interview.

In a way, cinema after the revolution was like a fragile newborn child in a new country with parents who do not speak the language and need to gauge their environment before taking their child out for a walk. Although censorship had become stricter than ever before, with a little time and experience, this was also relaxed. A few years after the revolution, especially after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, a close-up or a two shot of a man and woman on screen was not longer taboo. Behrooz Afkhami's *Arus* (*The Bride*) from 1990 is one the best examples of these taboos no longer being a



Figure 2 Susan Taslimi in *Bashu, The Little Stranger*, 1985/6

problem; in fact, this film also revives the stardom trend in Iranian cinema. It is full of close-ups of a soon-to-be very famous Iranian actress, Niki Karimi, the actress of three

of the films (*The Fifth Reaction*, *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt* and *Sara*) selected for this study.



Figure 3 Niki Karimi in *The Bride*, 1990

The third reason the “averted look” is not valid to films made after the first decade after the revolution is how Naficy employs the veil in his argument. Naficy asserts that the veil creates a mystery for the viewer and therefore makes the gaze more pleasurable and voyeuristic. But the veil in the post-revolutionary culture is an inherent aspect that should not outshine the whole film industry. If the notion of the “averted look” was to be inclusive, then this would leave no room for any filmmaker to ever make a gender-nuanced film, because due to the existence of the veil the female character in a film would always be positioned as the object of desire, and that would undermine all the efforts that have been put into cinema over the past thirty years. For a

foreign audience, the veil perhaps is at first a strange element that distinguishes an Iranian film from a western film, and perhaps even seems to be the key signifier of oppression under which women live in Iran. But to the people living in Iran, the veil is no longer a priority for change; if the audience makes it past the surface of the veil, underneath is not so different to what they are used to either. The headscarf has become part of Iranian culture. Everywhere in the world hair design and fashion undergo changes over time. In Iran, the shape, colour, and wrapping style of the headscarf changes. It took artists many years to overcome this obstacle, but now they even employ it to their artistic benefit (as is discussed further in Chapters 4, 5, and 6). In an interview in the late 1990s, one of the great Iranian directors, Abbas Kiarostami, admitted he had not portrayed women as his main characters because he couldn't depict them as they really were within their private versus public spaces. He also adds that he tried to avoid narratives that require men and women in close interactions to evade the issue of censorship.⁷⁰ But in 2001 he made *Ten*, a female-centric film addressing many taboos and issues regarding women (discussed in detail in Chapter 6).

My final argument against the validity of the concept of the “averted look” is the fact that the female subjects in Iranian films are aware of the fact they are being looked at (at all times at least by one male audience) and can therefore no longer be considered to be the object of a voyeuristic gaze. On the relation of the women's identifying with the hero in the film, borrowed from other media and mass cultures proceeding cinema, Mulvey observes, “The woman spectator in the cinema can make use of an age-old

⁷⁰ Negar Motahedeh, “Where are Kiarostami's women?” *On the Foreignness of Film*, 2004, 5.

cultural tradition adapting her to this convention, which eases a transition out of her own sex into another.” As previously stated, Mulvey argues that women can take two possible roles in relation to a film: a masochistic identification with the female object of desire that is ultimately self-defeating, or a transsexual identification with men as the active viewers of the text.⁷¹ The second role coincides with the role Iranian spectators and filmmakers have to assume at all times. As the cinematic screen is considered public space, no matter what the subject is, the images have to comply with public space codes of modesty. That is, women have to be depicted as if they are in a public space even though they may be at home, a private space. With respect to Iranian female spectators, the “transsexual identification with men” is inherent. As it was discussed earlier, voyeurism happens when the object of the look is unaware of the gaze; but I argue, in the case of the female characters in an Iranian film, they know they are being looked at (at least by one male spectator), hence the use of public attire versus private. The whole notion of the “averted look” is therefore no longer relevant.

Bearing this in mind, this thesis is examining the change in the representation of women in Iranian films since the 1990s to find the different methods filmmakers have adapted to break away from these established cinematic codes and formative external structures that, as Mulvey asserts, “must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged.”⁷²

⁷¹ Mulvey, *Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”*

⁷² Ibid.

Methodology

Growing up in a filmmaking family and having close ties to the filmmaking society in Iran, I have been party to many discussions as to how cinema worked before and after the revolution. My close relationship with the cinema industry and also having access to all the films made in Iran since 1986 has given me an inherent understanding of how the film industry works in Iran. However, after finishing my MA and while doing a preliminary research about Iranian cinema through the available secondary sources in English, I noticed a gap between what I learned in Iran and what is presented through those texts.

This gap between what the filmmakers working in Iran perceive and what can be gathered through the available secondary sources became the departing position for this research. I then became interested in exploring the institutional mechanisms in Iranian film industry, particularly those independent institutions from which many of the great filmmakers after the revolution came. In this dissertation, I focus on the independent institutions that were formed along with the dominant film industry since the 1960s and work my way through the revolution, mapping the shifts in the film industry. For my research, I have conducted numerous interviews with filmmakers and industry members. I have included sections of these interviews in my research, suggesting the importance of oral history in re-centering neglected histories and filling the mentioned gap. However, oral history is not an end in itself; similar to official histories, oral and personal accounts are subject to motivated or unmotivated distortions and dismissals.

Thus, using other forms of evidence, secondary sources, and utilizing the films themselves, this dissertation offers a discussion on how the film industry in Iran has shifted in the direction that resulted in a fuller representation of women in Iranian cinema.

This thesis compares and traces shifts in the representation of women in the films made in the 1990s with films made before the Islamic revolution and films made in the first decade after the revolution in relation to changes in Iranian society. Informed by feminist film theories and taking into consideration the unique social and political situations dominant in Iranian media production, this thesis analyzes the content of these films. Examining films with respect to the representation of women, the research relies on textual analysis as its basic methodology. In addition to this, as mentioned, numerous interviews were conducted with filmmakers and people active in the industry, which also helps to map the films in the sociopolitical context in which they were produced.

Chapter 2: An Institutional History of Iranian Cinema

Introduction

With twentieth-century Iranian history as its backdrop, Iranian cinema has endured many changes and interruptions. As a result, it has steered slightly in different directions at different moments throughout its history. These trends include everything from cinema's status as a luxury apparatus used to entertain a small group of elites in the royal court of the Qajar shahs, to its introduction to the general public and the production of the first Iranian films outside Iran in the late 1920s, to the introduction of tight censorship and state control of the film industry under Pahlavi rule in the 1930s as well as the Allies' occupation of Iran during the second world war, causing the film industry to almost fade away. Fortunately, the film industry gained its strength back in the late 1940s and 1950s, especially through importation of industry cultures from

popular Hollywood cinema and the influential neighbouring Indian cinema.⁷³ Albeit on a smaller scale, like these other film industries, Iranian cinema began to fall into the hands of the producers, leading to a focus on profit making. When the feature film industry conformed to this commercialism, lowbrow commercial entertainment films now known as the *film farsi* genre were introduced into the filmic language of Iranian cinema. As is discussed in more depth in the next chapter, these films employed sex, violence, and song and dance themes to appeal to audiences, mainly poor male filmgoers, and kept the producers' pockets full.⁷⁴

To address the vast increase in the involvement of women in Iranian cinema, it is first necessary to place the development into the cultural-institutional context of Iranian cinema since the mid-twentieth century. Therefore this chapter adapts a Feminist Historical Institutional (FHI) approach to explore the missing link in discussions on the institution of Iranian cinema, which I argue helped to pave the way for female filmmakers to enter the feature filmmaking arena in the 1980s. This Historical Institutional approach allows us to look at change over a span of time from before to after a historical juncture to see whether the result is due to the critical juncture or it is rooted to the time before it. This chapter looks at the institution of Iranian cinema briefly since the 1960s and sheds light on some significant developments alongside mainstream cinema that (to my surprise) have made very little

⁷³ Shahla Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006), 140.

⁷⁴ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 90; Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, "Iranian Intellectuals and Contact with the West: The Case of Iranian Cinema." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3 (2007): 377.

appearance in the scholarly discussions on Iranian cinema, though their significance is very pertinent to the people involved in the industry. This chapter also employs empirical information obtained through interviews with certain directors and industry members, along with secondary sources.

With regards to Iranian cinema, as with so many other aspects of Iranian society and culture, the Islamic revolution of 1979 cannot be seen as the sole catalyst for change, but rather as an important historical juncture that functioned to both accelerate and stagnate existing movements and establish new ones. The groundwork for the changes initiated after the Iranian revolution had already been laid in the decades before the revolution; therefore, in order to effectively explore the post-revolutionary culture, one needs to go back to the 1960s. A feminist historical institutional approach developed within a social sciences perspective helps to explain the changes over the three decades from the 1960s to 1990s — the climax in the shift in the number of representative women in the film industry — specifically changes in the structure of the Iranian cinema industry in the years after the revolution. The application of the Historical Institutional approach that makes new gender arrangements and understandings possible constructs Feminist Institutionalism. This approach allows us to seek answers as to why the number of female filmmakers has significantly increased in the years since the Islamic revolution.

Feminist Institutionalism is an approach that combines elements of new institutionalism (NI); in particular, historical institutionalism (HI) and feminist theory.

“A synthesized approach — a feminist historical institutionalism (FHI) — may provide crucial insights into the dynamics of institutional continuity and change [...] a significant contribution [...] is to help us answer some of the big puzzles, in particular how and why does institutional change come about, which in turn can help us to understand how positive gender change can take place.”⁷⁵ This approach, while it helps to answer some “big questions” about institutions, can also, in turn, help us to understand how positive gender change, “such as improvements in women’s descriptive and substantive representation, can come about.”⁷⁶ Georgina Waylen asserts that HI can lead to better understanding of the relation between the institution’s structure and issues of agency within the institution, and explains why and how positive gender changes might occur in some contexts and not in others. Adapting this approach can help explain why, in the context of the Iranian film industry, the changes that were implemented after the Islamic revolution resulted in women taking a more prominent role.

Waylen further stresses that in order to explain these kinds of gender outcomes within HI, several things need to be considered. The first point is that it is important to identify the causal sequences and pathways that resulted in these changes over a span of twenty to thirty years from before the moment of transition until afterwards. This chapter looks at the changes and the emergence of smaller independent groups of

⁷⁵ Georgina Waylen, *Engendering Transitions: Women’s Mobilization, Institutions and Gender Outcomes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Anette Borchorst, *Gendering Institutional Analysis: Understanding Parental Leave Reforms in Denmark and Sweden: Proceedings of 8th ESPAnet annual conference 2010*, Budapest, Hungary, September 2-4, 2010.

⁷⁶ Georgina Waylen, “What Can Historical Institutionalism offer Feminist Institutionalists?” *Politics & Gender*, no. 5 (2009): 245-253.

filmmakers alongside the Iranian film industry from the 1960s, almost two decades before the revolution. The second point that HI considers and focuses on is the point of transition itself, which is “identified as a form of critical juncture.” The Islamic revolution brought with it a set of new ideologies that changed Iranian society as a whole and shifted the purpose and aim of cultural productions in particular. After the revolution and implementation of different codes of modesty, the Iranian film industry came to a temporary halt until all the necessary changes could be implemented. This is when a fresh and interested group who understood the Islamic ideology espoused by the new regime joined the film industry. This new group, along with the smaller independent groups who were in the peripheries, took precedence, replacing mainstream film production and creating a new Iranian film industry after the revolution.

Lastly, Waylen adds, a feminist HI approach explores institutional and contingent developments to see how many of these “outcomes emerge as a result of path dependent processes set in train at the point of transition and how far they are also a result of on-going contestation.”⁷⁷ This final point, along with the outcome of the first and second points, is what will ascertain whether the increase in the number of women in the film industry in the years after the revolution is due to the Islamic revolution itself or due to the ongoing changes that were taking place before the revolution, and which the revolution had perhaps accelerated.

There are two theories as to why the revolution facilitated the increase in

⁷⁷ Ibid.

visibility of women in Iranian society as a whole. These approaches are discussed fully in Chapter 4 with regards to cinema. In summary, one, and perhaps the less popular, perspective is the viewpoint that Afsaneh Najmabadi offers. She asserts that although after the revolution women were faced with many restrictions, even denied some of their previously gained rights, and were oppressed in some spheres, there were still many areas where women flourished intellectually. She argues that this is due to women's ongoing efforts to make their position more equal to the men's in society.⁷⁸ The other point of view, which Mahnaz Afkhami argues, is that women's achievements are partly in spite of or against the Islamic republic. Opposition is therefore seen as the sole driving force for women in Iran, and all their achievements since the Islamic revolution are discussed with regards to their increasing oppositional power, i.e. the "on-going contestation" to the post-revolutionary regime.⁷⁹ The latter view, I believe, is in danger of neglecting the agency of Iranian women as active participants in shaping their own future and their persistence in trying to find outlets for expressing their points of view within the dominant patriarchal society of Iran, whether it be the society before the revolution or thereafter. Thus, while this thesis focuses on the image of Iranian women portrayed on the screen, it also addresses the topic of Iranian women behind the camera, as a way of demonstrating their active roles in Iranian society.

Films made after the revolution do reflect progress and ongoing challenges in Iranian society. This thesis also shows how Iranian women have exerted agency to

⁷⁸ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "(Un)Veiling Feminism," *Social Text* 64, Volume 18, no. 3 (2000): 30.

⁷⁹ Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl, *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (London ; New York: Tauris, 1994), 5-18.

break many taboos through film. As a result, audiences have been introduced to new ways of seeing. It is during the reform era, since President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami took office in 1997 until the end of his second term, that the media became somewhat more liberated and was employed increasingly as an outlet for people to voice their criticism of society; topics included support of a particular political party and issues regarding women's roles in society. The relaxation of the censorship codes was the most significant outcome of this era, allowing filmmakers to tackle more controversial and taboo subjects in their films. During this time, some previously banned films like Ali Hatami's *Haji Washington* (1982), Dariush Mehrjui's *Banoo* (*The Lady*, 1992), and Mohesen Makhmalbaf's *Noon va Goldun* (*A Moment of Innocence*, 1996) finally received screening permits. Also, the introduction of a comprehensive cinema construction program alongside the decision to leave cinema policies unchanged for five years helped the film industry to gain some freedom and security. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), since its launch after the revolution, set to have annual declarations of policy, adding to the uncertain nature of media production in post-revolutionary years.⁸⁰ As Bani-Etemad explains briefly, right after the revolution no one — not even the people running MCIG — knew what needed to be done or what needed to be changed in order for a) everything to be on par with the Islamic ideology and b) to still leave freedom for artistic expression, which is why in the first few years they had to change the policies annually.⁸¹ During the reform era after 1997, the annual

⁸⁰ Josef Gugler, ed., *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011), 55.

⁸¹ Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Personal interview. August 2008. Tehran, Iran.

declaration of the MCIG was unproductive and disruptive, leaving no certainty for filmmakers, as everything could change on a whim.⁸² These annual policy changes could change anything from the number of films that could get permission to shoot annually and the necessary documents required to get the permission, to funding and distribution rights and regulations. However, this five-year review of policies was short-lived, like many other policies in Iran that by the end of the reform era had also come to an end. In recent years, after the end of the reform era by election of the hardliner President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, the policy changes have almost gone back to that annual revision.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable undertakings of the reform era was the relaxation of censorship codes, which helped filmmakers to tackle more risky and taboo topics. It was during this time that films directly addressed the involvement of younger generations in elections; many films included scenes that showed support of the left political party (the less conservative party, led by Mohammad Khatami) while depicting its popularity with the general public. Such films like Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Zir-e post-e shahr* (*Under the City's Skin*, 2001), while addressing many social issues such as class differences and financial hierarchies, the lack of jobs for young subjects, and the increase in the number of young men wanting to do labour work abroad in the hopes of making a better life for themselves, also depicted the allegiance of teenagers with the left political party in Iran on the eve of the elections. This film shows the difference

⁸² Josef Gugler, ed., *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011), 55.

between the teenagers, who still hope to take part in decision-making for their own future by electing the right candidate, and older generations who have lost hope and want to leave the country. There were also films made depicting issues regarding the lack of freedom of speech in Iran and especially in the press, such as the popular film by Saman Moghadam *Party* (2000), about a journalist from one of Iran's most liberal magazines who is accused of insulting the state upon publishing his dead brother's war memoirs. In the film, the journalist's friends proceed to rent his family home as a party venue to make his bail money. Their plan was successful until they held a party that was against the state's rules: mixed gender with alcohol and loud western music. This film was almost banned by the authorities, but, after a couple of scenes had been cut, it was finally screened that year.

Other social taboos portrayed in films from that era are issues of prostitution, temporary marriages, and runaway girls. Behrooz Afkhami's *Shokaran* (*Hemlock*, 2001), and both films by Rasoul Sadr Ameli, *Dokhtari ba kafsh-haye katani* (*The Girl in the Sneakers*, 1999) and *Man Taraneh, panzdah sal daram* (*I'm Taraneh, 15*, 2002) were box-office hits that provoked controversy and protest, highlighted changing forms and subject matters, and illustrated the fine line between the permissible, the critical, and the officially acceptable. For instance, *I'm Taraneh, 15* is the story of a teenage girl from a poor and broken home who becomes pregnant after a temporary marriage (*sigheh*). Despite social pressures, she decides to keep the child and raise it, as a single mother. The film plays on a very thin line of what is acceptable in society and what is not in the eyes of the law. Technically, she made the right Islamic choice by keeping the

child and avoiding abortion, but at the same time, the conservative society is not ready to admit that there could be single mothers whose children have legitimate fathers, even though they may not be present. As a result, an individual, in this case a single mother, is not given enough freedom to be able to carry on with her life without scrutiny.

This chapter is not a comprehensive study of every filmmaking company and institution in Iran throughout its history. Nevertheless, focusing on some influential elements in the Iranian film industry throughout the 1960s and 1970s and carrying over into the post-revolutionary years provides a framework for the argument of this thesis regarding the increase of the number of female professionals in the Iranian film industry in the 1980s, while also shedding light on the foundational framework that has supported Iranian cinema's most celebrated figures and productions.

The 1960s, Iran at the Verge of Modernity

Iranian society was on the verge of an upheaval in the 1960s, and it is directly reflected in the films produced in that era. On the one hand, as Hamid Dabashi asserts, the socio-political changes in Iran were in part due to a shift in the Shiite clerical authority dating back to 1961.⁸³ Although active changes did start to take place when Ayatollah Khomeini replaced Ayatollah Boroujerdi in 1961, the Iranian religious

⁸³ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 25.

modernists, known as *Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran* (Liberation Movement of Iran [LMI]), were also still active under the leadership of Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani. LMI dated back to Mossadegh's era in the early 1950s. It was Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology, finally surpassing LMI's moderate theocracy in 1963, that led to a major and brutally suppressed uprising against the Shah's "white revolution." On the other hand, the rejection of the uncritical adoption of foreign values by the foreign-educated intellectuals led to a shift in the intellectual discourse, best represented by Jalal-e al-e Ahmad's popular treatise *Gharb-Zadegi* (*Westoxication*), published in 1962. Through this climate, where clergy had already started actively opposing the Shah's plans for developing the country, many literary activists, poets, writers, and filmmakers emerged. As Mehrnaz Saeed Vafa explains, "Their work was charged with political rebellion and existential despair, as well as a skeptical view of progress and development."⁸⁴

Sadegh Hedayat in fiction, Nima Yushij in poetry, and Jalal-e Al-e Ahmad in social criticism were among the literary intellectual leaders of this opposition. The political changes of the 1960s also produced some ideologues such as Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati with their strong Marxist/socialist and anti-colonial backgrounds. It is obvious that these intellectuals' "embrace of Islam forced them to create a radically alternative form of revolutionary socialism,"⁸⁵ but as Ali Mirsepassi asserts, the

⁸⁴ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, "Ebrahim Golestan: Treasure of Pre-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema," Rouge, <http://www.rouge.com.au/11/golestan.html>. "Accessed on Jan 2012".

⁸⁵ Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 155.

“Iranian Revolution was not a simple clash between modernity and tradition but an attempt to accommodate modernity within a sense of authentic Islamic identity.”⁸⁶

Mirsepasi explains movements such as the Iranian Islamic revolution as movements that “promote social and cultural institutions, which are modern but ‘authentically local.’” He goes on to say, “These ‘local’ forms of resistance confront a global problem — the universalizing and homogenizing tendencies of ‘Western’ modernity — and thus they have a distinctly universal character. The politics of modernity is therefore neither local nor authentic. What matters is that it is grounded in some construction of ‘local.’”⁸⁷

This intellectual movement was not confined only to the literary and political realms, but also spread to other cultural outputs such as films. There were some significant and memorable films produced in the 1960s, which are often referred to as the pioneering films of Iranian New Wave cinema.

Iranian “New Wave”

In the 1960s, films also started to become the subject of intellectual debates and began to have some political charge. Filmmakers used the typical protagonist inherent to what is known today as *film farsi* and gave a slight edge unique to the films made in this period. The *luti*, the *film farsi*’s protagonist, was usually represented as a macho

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 127.

man taking the law into his own hands, and some of the films from this period also “embodied a political struggle between ordinary lower-class people and the establishment.”⁸⁸ *Lutis*’ self-respect was gained in both fighting the tyrant and the westernized rich while remembering the poor and those in need.⁸⁹ Although there may be some differences of opinion among Iranian film scholars as to which film was the point of departure for this Iranian New Wave movement, they all collectively acknowledge its existence.⁹⁰

A crucial development alongside mainstream cinema was the formation of several independent and semi-independent companies whose aim was to create more meaningful, artistic, and expressive films that were not under the same financial pressure as those in mainstream cinema.

A specific and critical event was the establishment of the *Madresa-yi Alliye Television va Sinema* (College of Television and Cinema), a film school based on the idea of creating a better cinema under the flagship of the *Sazman-e Radio va Television-e Melli-ye Iran* (National Iranian Radio and Television [NIRT]). Surprisingly, this school is not mentioned in any of the texts looking at the evolution of Iranian cinema in the 1960s. A possible explanation for this omission is that the Iranian film industry of those days was quite elitist and exclusive, and had kept itself separate from the newly introduced technology — television. In fact, many of the film producers at first did not

⁸⁸ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 111.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*; Dabashi, *Close Up*.

welcome the idea of their films being broadcast on television. It was only later, in the 1970s, that some producers agreed to sell the rights for a one-off showing of their films on television in order to compensate for their losses due to a lack of revenue.⁹¹

This school is highly significant for several reasons. Firstly, it was a base of contact for several of the key figures of this intellectual movement, and a good number of people who are responsible for the Iranian New Wave were among its first lecturers. Secondly, it was the early graduates of this school that made up a good portion of the backbone of the Iranian film industry of the post-revolutionary years. The advent of such a school portrays the very first steps of the Iranian film industry becoming more accessible and less exclusive. As a result, I find this period of Iranian cinema particularly important not only because of the production of a number of influential films but also because of the creation of an ideology promoting better cinema that was not bounded by the profit it could make. While this ideology may not have stemmed from the same source as the Islamic republic's ideology, which incorporated a set of modesty rules in all levels of the Iranian film industry to cleanse it from the associated corruption, on face value they both were in search of a more meaningful cinema. This is particularly important because the students of the New Wave school of Iranian cinema formed the majority of the Iranian film industry after the revolution. This gave rise to a paradox that Dabashi observes at the heart of Iranian contemporary cinema, which

⁹¹ Mehrabi. *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran*, 366; Many texts don't even mention NIRT as a role player in the Iranian film industry before the revolution, although NIRT created the Telefilm fund, which produced several films that fit well into the framework of the Iranian New Wave. Mehrabi's history of Iranian cinema book, a valuable source on the history of Iranian cinema, does include a whole section on NIRT, but unfortunately it fails to mention anything regarding the newly established College of Television and Cinema.

“speaks of the dialectical outcome of the sets of oppositional forces that are competing for dominance in the post-revolutionary Iranian culture at large.”⁹² This perhaps can be explained through the meeting point and the simultaneous work of these two ideologies alongside one another.

Iranian Independent Cinema of the 1960s

In reaction to the manipulated cinema of the 1960s, a group of foreign-educated intellectual filmmakers started their own film studios. In 1969, several key figures in Iranian cinema established a movement under the name *Cinemayeh Azad* (Free Cinema),⁹³ which was endorsed by Ferydoon Rahnama, one of three figures responsible for the inception of Iranian New Wave. *Cinemaye Azad*, in its ten years of activity until the 1979 Revolution, had an outreach program that brought cinema to other cities. By the end, they had held film workshops in more than twenty cities throughout Iran.⁹⁴

In 1973, fifteen leading members of *Ettehadiya-ye Honarmandan* (The Artists' Union) resigned and created a new guild under the title *Kanun-e Sinemagaran-e Pishro* (The Progressive Filmmakers Union). They named several reasons for their protest: (1) that they did not believe in the cinema that the Artists' Union promoted; (2) that the real members' rights were underestimated by some powerful (executive) producers within

⁹² Hamid Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 16.

⁹³ Mehrabi, *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran*, 194.

⁹⁴ Cinemaye Azad, <http://www.cinemaye-azad.com/karnameh/karnameh.html>. Accessed Jan 2008.

the system that the union had employed; and (3) that the union was protecting the profit of those who promoted worthless cinema, which had no identity and which misrepresented the national culture.⁹⁵

In spite of the general commercial film industry, the Iranian New Wave came into existence, seeking new ways of expression and a more meaningful cinema. Introducing the Iranian New Wave movement of the 1960s, Mirbakhtyar talks about three key figures, filmmakers and theoreticians, who helped shape this movement: Ebrahim Golestan, Farrokh Ghaffari, and Ferydoon Rahnama. Ghaffari and Rahnama were educated in France and were well acquainted with French cinema, more specifically the French New Wave. As Mirbakhtyar says,

There is little doubt that New Wave in Iranian cinema, which is also known as cinema of intellect, was generated under the shadow of French New Wave cinema and Italian Neorealism. The three filmmakers, while differing in attitude and technique, shared a common goal: to work against commercial cinematic forms, and create films that expressed not only new ideas, but also the values and traditions of the society they were portraying.⁹⁶

The two filmmakers and theoreticians, Ghaffari and Rahnama, had very significant and influential roles in Iranian cinema, and will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter. Ebrahim Golestan, the third pole of this New Wave movement, established his own company and took charge of the films he produced. He recruited many young filmmakers and gave them the chance to develop their art with complete

⁹⁵ Mehrabi, *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran*, 194.

⁹⁶ Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution*, 40.

freedom.

Golestan Film Unit

Ebrahim Golestan, a filmmaker, writer, and translator, launched the Golestan Film Unit in 1955 — the first filmmaker in Iran to have established his own film studio — while he was working on six documentary shorts under the title *cheshm andaz* (*View Point*). The films concerned the establishment of some of the oil companies in the south of Iran. The main purpose of the Golestan Film Unit was to produce documentary films by providing the best available technical equipment, while giving their filmmakers complete artistic freedom to approach the subject and allow for experimentation. By creating an ideal environment for talented young artists, the Golestan Film Unit, as Mohammad-Reza Sharifi explains, became an educational institution, where some of the more prominent Iranian directors such as Naser Taghvaei and Forough Farrokhzad started their filmmaking careers. Naser Taghvaei started his career at Golestan Film Unit as a technical assistant and then moved up the ladder. The same is true for Forough Farrokhzad; she started there as a typist and then moved to editing and later directing.

Khaneh Siah Ast (*The House is Black*, 1962), one of the first films made by a female director, is by the prominent poet Forough Farrokhzad. *The House is Black* is a short documentary on a leper colony in the northwest of Iran. In this film, Farrokhzad breaks social clichés by not just showing the darkness and horrifying reality of leprosy,

but by looking past the ugly and finding beauty, love, and hope for the future — all that has given meaning to the lives of those suffering from the disease. This is an influential film, and one that still has the ability to connect with its audience to this day for two reasons. Firstly, because this film, now removed from the time and place in which it was shot, does not just present the physical place and people it depicts; it represents a larger scale of places and people. Secondly, because it is based on an allegorical concept: life in the leper colony as a metaphor for life in general. People do not need to have leprosy to be trapped; they often live in the traps they have built with their own hands.⁹⁷ Very much ahead of its time, *The House is Black* is “a film that, with its poetic treatment of leprosy, anticipated much that was to follow in Iranian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s.”⁹⁸

Kanun: The Centre for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults

These yearnings for a better cinema in contrast to the dominant commercial film industry were not confined only to the filmmakers themselves. Some official members of the government also lent a hand to this movement. For instance, Farah Diba, Mohammad Reza Shah’s wife and the Queen of Iran, acted as the Ambassador of Art

⁹⁷ Maryam Ghorbankarimi, “The house is black; a timeless visual essay,” in *Forough Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry*, ed. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010).

⁹⁸ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 27.

and Culture in Iran. As a result, she had a significant role in the progress and preservation of art and culture in the country.⁹⁹ In 1969, *Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri-ye Kudak va Nowjavan* (The Centre for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults [CIDCYA]) or, as it is known in Iran, *Kanun*, was established with Farah's endorsement. Mehrabi explains that this centre was created as an avenue to make films, which, despite popular cinema, was to produce a cinema far from banality and the profit motive.¹⁰⁰

As it can be understood from the name, this centre was to make films with children and young adults as their main target audience. It would ask for a simpler and cleaner cinema with educational values, which would result in more meaningful films. This also partly explains the reason for the seemingly excessive number of memorable films in the history of Iranian cinema portraying young subjects. It is also worth noting that the prominent animation film industry of Iran owes its existence in part to the formation of *Kanun*. Key figures in Iranian animation, such as Nur al-din Zarrinkelk, Akbar Sadeghi, and Farshid Mesghali, worked with and were supported through this institution, which had a fixed group of employed filmmakers but also invited guest filmmakers to work on different projects. Another significant achievement of this centre was to form a film archive, which remains one of the most important treasures of the Iranian film industry to this day. Many significant films were produced through *Kanun*,

⁹⁹ I do not want to enter into a political discussion of whether or not her decisions with regards to the bigger picture of Iran were sound or not; I am merely observing the results of some of her actions with regards to the Iranian film industry

¹⁰⁰ Mehrabi, *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran*, 400.

and many filmmakers found free space there to make films they could not otherwise have made. In fact, Zarrinkelk asserts that some filmmakers pushed the boundaries of intellectual expression in the first few years to an extent that some of the films were not only beyond the comprehension of children — the supposed target audience — they were not even comprehensible by adults. He then goes on to say that experimentation was inherent in such an intellectual movement, explaining why it resulted in such a positive outcome.¹⁰¹ The centre allowed for the production of a number of experimental and short films. Directors such as Abbas Kiarostami and Naser Taghvaei started their careers through *Kanun*, and some prominent directors of the time, such as Bahram Beizai and Masud Kimiai, used this environment to make short films. *Kanun* is one of the main institutions that continued its work after the revolution without significant change. Of course there was a large turnover in its administrative staff, but most of its creative personnel stayed intact. Most importantly, what remained unchanged was its mission statement. *Kanun* was one of the first organizations to resume film production after the halt imposed by the revolution. Three very important films of the post-Revolutionary years, *Davandeh* (*The Runner*, 1985) by Amir Naderi, *Bashu, Gharibeh-i Kuchak* (*Bashu, the Little Stranger*, 1986) by Bahram Beizai, and *Khaneye Dust Kojast?* (*Where is the Friend's Home?*, 1987) by Abbas Kiarostami were all produced through *Kanun*.

¹⁰¹ Mehrabi, *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran*, 403-404.

Madresa-yi Alliyeh Television va Sinema (College of Television and Cinema)

Another significant institute briefly mentioned earlier was the *Madresa-yi Alliyeh Television va Sinema* (College of Television and Cinema), formed in 1968. This college was a film school based on the very ideas of creating a better cinema under the flagship of the *Sazman-e Radio va Television-e Melli-ye Iran* (National Iranian Radio and Television [NIRT]). Reza Ghotbi Gilani, a young intellectual politician who had been educated abroad and who acted as the head of NIRT from 1967 to 1979, established this college.

Ghotbi shared the same ideology as the filmmakers of the Iranian New Wave and helped create an open environment, which, I would like to argue, was very significant. At a time when it was impossible to pursue a career in the film industry without some kind of a connection, NIRT announced an entry exam for a newly established film school through public media, newspapers, and television. Anyone was eligible to take the exam. This was one of the first instances where Iranian cinema became widely accessible to the general public. Unlike the majority of filmmakers in the Iranian film industry up to this point, most of whom generally came from affluent families who could afford to send their children to Europe or America to attend film school,¹⁰² the participants of this school did not necessarily come from wealthy

¹⁰² Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 47.

backgrounds.¹⁰³ However, potential students who took the exam tended to have a general interest in the arts, and specifically a keen interest in cinema. Not a widely acceptable medium in the public's eye, cinema had, in fact, been rejected by the clergy. According to Mir-Hosseini, cinema was among those fields of art considered forbidden; some religious families deemed just going to a movie a sin.¹⁰⁴

Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi, one of the first graduates of this school, came from a traditionally religious family. He explains that his family not only forbade him from watching films, but also discouraged him from attending the school. Believing that cinema was associated with unholy deeds, Ghorbankarimi's brother offered him everything he had to make him change his mind. As the Iranian patriarchal society has an even more biased outlook towards women taking part in unsanctioned activities, it is not difficult to imagine what their opinion might be regarding a woman attending this school. Therefore I argue that although these students did not necessarily come from upper-middle class families, they still had to come from open-minded and intellectually aware families, and therefore could not represent society as a whole.¹⁰⁵

My interviewees explained that cinema and television were considered to be detached from one another; they were not seen in the same light. Bani-Etemad agrees with this point and says that television was not tainted with the same corruption as

¹⁰³ Mahvash Tehrani and Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi, Personal interviews. September 2009. Toronto, Canada.

¹⁰⁴ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Iranian cinema: art, society and the state." *Middle East Report*, 219, (2001): 2.

¹⁰⁵ Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi, Personal interview. September 2009. Toronto, Canada.

cinema in the general public's opinion.¹⁰⁶ The corruption to which Bani-Etemad alludes can be compared to the classic Hollywood film industry concept of the "casting couch": the trading of sexual favours by actresses to producers in return for career advancement — an abuse of power and degrading to women in any culture, and especially dishonourable in a closed culture like Iran.

The College of Television and Cinema started offering two programs: *Towlid-e televisioni* (Television Production) and *Fanni-ye televisioni* (Television Technique). This section will focus on the television production program, which, based on the array of courses offered to the students, was an in-depth film studies/production program even by today's standards. A three-year sandwich degree, the students would study twelve to thirteen courses in the first year, would work at NIRT to gain experience during the second year, and in the third year would specialize in an area of their interest while taking twelve to thirteen advanced courses in film studies. The specializations included cinematography, directing, and editing. The core courses the students were offered were Art History, Film Interpretation, Film Aesthetic, Scenography, Photography, Cinematography (both theoretical and practical), Directing (both theoretical and practical), Technology (television), and Physics. Some of the specialized courses included Laboratory and Sensitometer, Decoupage, and Colour Television. Among their liberal courses were French Language and Music.¹⁰⁷

What made this school unique was the collection of influential New Wave

¹⁰⁶ Bani-Etemad, Personal interview.

¹⁰⁷ The College of Television and Cinema, *Undergraduate Degree* (Tehran, 1971).

filmmakers and thinkers who were among its main lecturers. Some of the most famous names include Fereydun Rahnema, Hajir Dariush, Hushang Kavusi, Dariush Mehrjui, Farokh Ghaffari, and Hushang Baharlu. By introducing some of these influential figures, this section will portray how progressive these groups of intellectual filmmakers were. For instance, Dariush Mehrjui, one of the main figures of the Iranian New Wave, explained why he had dropped out of the film program at UCLA and instead completed a philosophy degree:

At UCLA they only look at the cinema from a Hollywood perspective and they were not interested in cinema as an art form. Our school was a workshop that had equipment, and the purpose was to learn the equipment so that we might get a job as a cleaner at one of the studios. We could hardly find among the lecturers one who truly believed in cinema as art. All discussions were about who was where and who made what and who knocked down who [*sic*], and how the big boss of that big company was all of a sudden kicked out, and who WB knocked down at MGM and so on. This was not tolerable for me, perhaps the choice of going towards philosophy was in a way a reaction to those Hollywood-infected lectures.¹⁰⁸

The creator of one of the most celebrated films of the 1960s, *Gav* (*The Cow*, 1969), Dariush Mehrjui taught a semester-long directing/scriptwriting course at the College of Television and Cinema. As Richard Tapper states, *The Cow* and also *Gheisar* by Masud Kimiai are “generally agreed to mark the birth of the Iranian art cinema, called ‘New Wave.’”¹⁰⁹ It is also worth noting that Dariush Mehrjui made this film one year after the establishment of the College of Television and Cinema, and it was used as

¹⁰⁸ Naser Zeraati, ed., *Dariush Mehrjui*, (Tehran: Negah Publishers, 1996), 84. (cited in Mirbakhtyar, 171)

¹⁰⁹ Tapper, “Introduction.” In *The New Iranian Cinema*, 4.

a great example for students the next year.¹¹⁰ *The Cow*, “the most significant turning point in the history of Iranian cinema,”¹¹¹ was based on a famous novel entitled *Azadarane Bayal* (*Bayal’s Mourners*), by Golam-Hossein Saidi, a well-known political writer, published in 1964.¹¹² It is the account of a peasant, Mash Hassan, and his obsession with his cow, the only source of wealth in his village. One day, while Mash Hassan has gone to the city, his cow dies a natural death. The people in the village bury the corpse but don’t dare to tell him the truth, so instead they tell him that the cow has escaped. Mash Hassan cannot take the pressure and has a nervous breakdown, and, little by little, he transforms into his cow. *The Cow* was also one of the first Iranian films to be well received internationally. In fact, its reception at the Venice Film Festival forced the state censor to release it domestically.¹¹³ Because of *The Cow*, as well as Masud Kimiai’s *Gheisar* (1969), which was also critically acclaimed as well as being a box office success, Mohammad Reza Sadr claims, “Iranian film was taken seriously as a subject of intellectual debate for the first time.”¹¹⁴

Hazhir Dariush, who studied cinema in London and was one of the most prominent filmmakers and film critics of the time, also taught directing at the college. Hushang Kavusi, educated in France and one of the most prominent Iranian film critics (and also made films himself), taught the History of Cinema course. Hushang Bahralu,

¹¹⁰ Mahvash Tehrani, Personal interview. September 2009. Toronto, Canada.

¹¹¹ Afkhami and Friedl, *In the Eye of the Storm*, 129.

¹¹² Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, 131.

¹¹³ Jamsheed Akrami, “Sustaining a wave for thirty years: the cinema of Dariush Mehrjui.” In *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: National Film Theatre, 1999), 129.

¹¹⁴ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, 136.

one of the best cinematographers of the time, taught Cinematography.

Farrokh Ghaffari, a writer and director, taught film interpretation/reading. He was educated in Belgium and France, returned to Iran in 1941, and established the National Film Center of Iran (an Iranian version of French *Cinémathèque*) in 1950. He also established the independent film studio *Iran Nama* in 1957, where his first film *Jonub-e Shahr* (*South of the City*, 1958) was produced. A critical look at the impoverished south side of Tehran, the film was banned at first, but released after a few years under the new title *Mosabeghe dar Shahr* (*Competition in the City*). One of the most important films of the decade, and one of Ghaffari's best films, *Shab-e Ghuzi* (*The Night of the Hunchback*, 1964), is "an intellectual analysis of the social make-up of Iranian society."¹¹⁵ A contemporary adaptation of one of the *Thousand and One Nights* stories, the film is about Hunchback, an actor in a popular theatre troupe, who accidentally dies, and the narrative advances with the desperate attempts of the other actors to find a way to dispose of his body. Ghaffari then gave up filmmaking and devoted all his time to researching and writing about Iranian cinema. He left Iran before the revolution and never returned.

Fereydun Rahnema, a film scholar and filmmaker who studied cinema at the University of Paris, graduating in 1957, taught Film Aesthetic at the College of Television and Cinema. As part of his degree, he completed a thesis entitled *Vaghe'garayi-ye film* (*Realism and Film*), which he published with some minor changes

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 125.

in Persian in 1972. Rahnama was one of the advocates of Iranian New Wave and one of the founders of *Cinema-ye Azad (Free Cinema)* in 1969. One of his most celebrated films is *Sivash dar Takht-e Jamshid (Siavash in Persepolis, 1967)*, which was produced by Telefilm through NIRT.¹¹⁶ The story is taken from the poem Siavash, from the epic book *Shahnamah (Book of Kings)* by Ferdowsi. The film is a highly symbolic and poetic representation of good and bad and light and dark through the telling of Siavash's story, using the ruins of Persepolis beautifully as its backdrop. In Mirbakhtyar's words, "In the film, the martyrdom of Siavash becomes the symbol of Iran herself, and can be considered to signify purity, justice, and light."¹¹⁷ Rahnama's major influence was in the production of documentary films, and after he joined NIRT in 1966, he established the Centre of Documentary Filmmaking with NIRT. One of the most important documentary series that he started was *Iranzamin (Iran)*, about different regions and peoples of Iran.¹¹⁸ Pouran Derakhshande, the first Iranian female director¹¹⁹ and also a graduate of College of Television and Cinema, started her career by making a few

¹¹⁶ Mehrabi, *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran*, 133.

¹¹⁷ Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution*, 45.

¹¹⁸ Mehrabi, *Tarikh-i sinima-yi Iran*, 361.

¹¹⁹ "Prior to the revolution, only one woman, Shahla Riahi, had directed a feature film (*Marjan*, 1956)" Hamid Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presence: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema." In *The Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 1994), 133.

Shahla Riahi is one of the oldest actresses in Iran who has worked in both film and television. She directed the first feature ever made in Iran by a female director, entitled *Marjan*, in 1956; however, due to its failure at the box office she did not pursue directing, but continues to work as an actress to this day. "Zani filmi dar bari-yi zan bisazad". Mardomak. http://www.mardomak.org/news/zan_dar_cinema_iran/. Accessed on July 10, 2008.

In this thesis I refer to Pouran Derakhshandeh as the first female feature film director after the revolution who has continued making films despite the existing difficulties to make films in Iran.

episodes for the *Iranzamin* series.¹²⁰

Figure 1 is a newspaper clipping from 1968 listing the names of the first group of students who had been accepted into the *Tolid* (Production) program at the College of Radio and Cinema. Almost all the students cited on the list continued working in the Iranian Television and Film industry after the revolution. The hands-on training in the film program at the NIRT College developed some of the best directors, cinematographers, editors, and costume designers in Iranian cinema. Here are the names of some of the people on this list who are still working or have recently retired.

¹²⁰ Pouran Derakhshandeh, First personal interview. July 2004. Tehran, Iran.

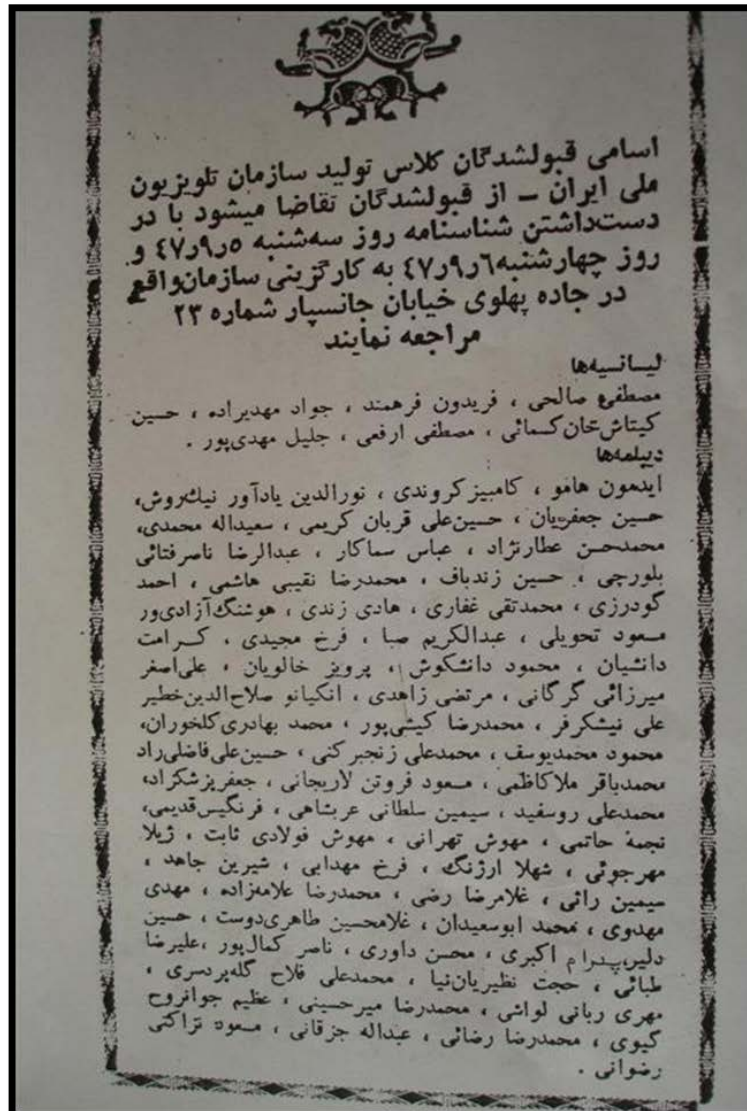


Figure 4 List of accepted students for *Tolid* (Production) program at NIRT College

Some stayed in television: Shirin Jahed (TV director), Azim Javanruh (Cinematographer). Some moved to animation production: Hosseinali Ghorbankarimi and Mahvash Tehrani. Some moved to the big screen: Hossein Jafarian (Director of

Cinematography [DOP]), Farhad Saba (DOP), Farrokh Majidi (DOP), Gholamreza Razi (DOP), Hossein Zandbaf (Editor), Zhila Mehrjui (Costume Designer/ Art Director).

Hossein Jafarian, one of the most celebrated cinematographers in Iran, simultaneously studied two major fine art programs in Tehran. A graduate of Tehran's University of Dramatic Arts as well as a graduate of NIRT College, he began his career working for NIRT, where he shot over 40 documentaries and TV shows before retiring early, not long after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and starting a full-time career in the film industry. His feature film debut was *Che por setare bud shabam* (*How Starry was My Night*, 1976). It is worth mentioning that this film was a *Cinemaye Azad* (Free Cinema) production. He has since shot more than 30 films, of which some are among the best films made since the Islamic Revolution. All three female directors discussed in Chapter 5 have worked with him on some of their most famous films; in fact, he is the director of cinematography for both the films *Nargess* and *Do Zan* (*Two Women*). His style is unique in his use of darkness and low-key lighting, and he also incorporates handheld shots in many of his films, which adds a level of realism and a social documentary feel. Many of his films have won awards at international film festivals, including Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees*, Jafar Panahi's *Crimson Gold*, and Asghar Farhadi's two films *Fireworks Wednesday* (another film discussed in this dissertation) and *About Elly*.

Abdulkarim (Farhad) Saba is another prominent cinematographer who graduated in same year as Hossein Jafarian. His work is very picturesque and he is famous for his

use of natural light and outdoor scenes. He has more than 30 feature films and many TV series to his credit, including two of the films from the Koker Trilogy by Abbas Kiarostami, *Khaneye Dust Kojast? (Where is Friend's Home?)* and *Zire Derakhtane Zeytun (Under the Olive Trees)*.

Hollywood vs. Islamic Production Codes

Looking at the institutional history of Iranian cinema to find the missing links between the pre- and post-revolutionary years has partially helped to demonstrate how Iranian cinema after the revolution was revived and gained prominence quickly. These continuous efforts, along with the implementation of the new Islamic order, also helped to set the situation for female filmmakers to enter the feature film industry, which then helped to change the representation of women in films in about a decade after the revolution. Looking at these gender shifts in Iranian cinema after the revolution and the impact of the Islamic ideology, one can see similarities between the films made in Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s, after the introduction of the Hollywood production code, with the films made after the Islamization of Iranian cinema after the revolution. There is an interesting parallel between the Hollywood production code introduced in the 1930s and the Islamic codes of modesty that were introduced into the Iranian film industry after the revolution. In both cases, the image of women changed and turned into a clichéd set of characters of mother, sister, and, in general, “good” women.

Since its inception, Iranian cinema has always been under rigid censorship. The Pahlavi regime had absolute domination over all aspects of public culture production. Mirbakhtyar observes the slow progress of Iranian cinema due to the establishment of harsh censorship laws.¹²¹ The censorship office, *Omur-e film va namayesh*, (Film screening and distribution) was first controlled by the Ministry of the Interior from 1940 to 1944 and then by *Vezerate-Farhang-e Honar* (The Ministry of Art and Culture).¹²² As a consequence of full state control, the film industry fell into the hands of producers who monopolized it. Mirbakhtyar describes the film industry before the revolution as a “dream factory” which was “manufacturing its products, primarily in keeping with the regime’s cultural policies, and secondly, in line with the will of producers who were only concerned about the box office.”¹²³

The censorship system in Iran before the Islamic revolution was not as systematic as the Hollywood Production Code. The act of censorship was dependent on the government’s daily political direction; the film industry would directly reflect what would help the government achieve their immediate goal. Therefore, censorship before the revolution would tighten or loosen at times. In the post-revolutionary years, the film industry in Iran went through a legitimizing phase, the most significant contribution being the implementation of codes of modesty. The authorities attempted “to disrupt the direct discursive link between the representation of women and the promotion of

¹²¹ Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution*, 21.

¹²² Homa Javdani, *Salshomar-e Tarikh-e Sinema-ye Iran: Tir 1279 – Shahrivar 1379* (Tehran: Nashr-e Ghatreh, 2002), 39.

¹²³ Mirbakhtyar, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution*, 22.

corruption, amorality, and pornography, which the Pahlavi era's cinema is said to have established.”¹²⁴ This aim was achieved by incorporating a complex system of modesty protocols at every level of the motion picture industry. All aspects of production, from registering the film script to obtaining shooting permits and exhibition licences, began to be controlled by *Vezeerat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Islami* (The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance [MCIG]).

Censorship and the implementation of moral codes were Hollywood's ways of trying to assert control over the representation of the culture. In the 1920s, after a series of scandals, motion picture producers introduced a set of moral codes intended to control the content of films.¹²⁵ In the 1930s, the Hollywood Production Code was introduced and, due to the fact that some producers either pushed it to its limits or completely ignored it, in 1934 a mechanism was set up to enforce the code. Every film produced or exhibited in America for the next thirty years had to receive a seal of approval from the office of Joseph Breen, the head of the Production Code Administration.¹²⁶

Before the Hollywood Production Code had been fully implemented, the representation of women was quite different and perhaps more similar to the

¹²⁴ Hamid Naficy, “Veiled Vision/Powerful Presence: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema.” In *The Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 1994), 131.

¹²⁵ These moral codes were created and implemented under the supervision of Will Hays, after whom they were christened the “Hays Codes.” Over time, the use of these codes became relaxed, which led to the introduction of a new set of codes.

¹²⁶ Gregory D. Black, “Hollywood Censored: The Production Code Administration and the Hollywood Film Industry, 1930-1940.” *Film History* 3 (1989): 167-189.

representation of women in films today than the women we see in films from the 1930s to the 1960s. In those earlier films, women were represented as complex, real, and unapologetically sexual. They played characters including prostitutes, businesswomen, women who cheated on their husbands, and women who sometimes got away with murder.¹²⁷ The protest of religious organizations and the Catholic Church in America forced the studios to “purify” the images of women in the movies.¹²⁸ This resulted in representations of women conforming to conservative and traditional social norms and values until the 1960s.¹²⁹

The act of purifying images of women in Hollywood in the 1930s is ironically very similar to the act of cleansing cinema in Iran in the 1980s, although with very different inspirations. While Hollywood’s main purpose was rooted in capitalism, in Iran it was more politically motivated.¹³⁰ Although it is the government enforcing these codes on the motion picture industry in Iran, we should not forget that cinema in Iran before the Islamic revolution was highly contested by religious groups in society. Indeed, there are still religious contestations to this day: recently, a religious film director was reported insulting Iranian cinema in general, and the actresses in particular. He called the female stars whores, a comment that resulted in many open letter

¹²⁷ Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*; Jane M. Greene, “Hollywood’s Production Code and Thirties Romantic Comedy,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 30, no. 1, (2010): 19; Steven C. Scheer, “A Review of Mick LaSalle’s *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood*,” <http://www.stevensscheer.com/lasalle.htm>. Accessed Jun 2011.

¹²⁸ Black, “Hollywood Censored: The Production Code Administration and the Hollywood Film Industry, 1930-1940.”

¹²⁹ Frank Miller, *Censored Hollywood* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1994).

¹³⁰ Hamid Naficy, “Islamicizing Film Culture in Iran,” in *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, eds., Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi (London: Routledge), 123-148; Naficy, “The Averted Gaze in Iranian Post-revolutionary Cinema.”

responses from both actresses and filmmakers. One the most renowned Iranian female directors, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, also wrote a response condemning his action.

Before the revolution, cinema production was a medium accessible only to intellectuals and members of the elite. It was only after the act of purification and legitimization that it truly became accessible to everyone, opening the film industry to a group of new talents after the revolution, among them directors such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Majid Majidi.

Cinema after the Revolution

After the collapse of the Pahlavi regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the country went through many changes that seemed even more extreme for the modern institutions of the previous regime. The transition from before the revolution to after the revolution was not an easy one, as the film industry had to be stripped of everything considered to be against the Islamic ideology. As Hamid Naficy discusses, in the early years after the revolution “the incorporation of modesty at all levels of motion picture industry and in the cinematic text” helped to cleanse the film industry of any connotations of amorality, corruption, and pornography that were associated with Pahlavi-era cinema. As part of the process of legitimizing the film industry, while cleansing it from what was considered inappropriate, a huge number of popular actors

and actresses involved in the industry were cut, and many filmmakers and professionals fled the country. All of this resulted in the film industry coming to a halt for a period.

After the Iranian revolution, many predicted that the film industry would die. On the contrary, though, cinema was revived, as it was considered to be an educational tool. The *ulema*, religious authorities who had previously either rejected or ignored cinema, had to make a decision regarding its future in Iran. They could either forbid it or take it under their full control and Islamize it. Of course they chose the latter; they were well aware of the cultural significance of cinema, as this famous quote from Ayatollah Khomeini suggests: “Cinema is one of the manifestations of culture and it must be put to service of man and his education.” Ayatollah Khomeini’s declarations broadly laid down the culture, worldview, and goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and consequently the basic responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), which supervised cultural activities in Iran. As a result, the objectives of the film industry shifted, and films became closely supervised by the religious authorities.

The MCIG was, for the most part, modeled after the Ministry of Art and Culture, which had been established in 1940. The biggest difference was that after the revolution there were no independent producers, and in first few years after the revolution most of the funding for film productions was only available through government agencies.

The College of Television and Cinema and NIRT continued their work after the revolution. NIRT is now called *Seda va Sima-ye Jomhuri-ye Islami-ye Iran* (Islamic

Republic of Iran Broadcasting [IRIB]) and the college now is called *Daneshkadeye Seda va Sima* (IRIB University). IRIB University now offers several undergraduate programmes along with two graduate programmes in various media and engineering subjects. Telefilm, the feature-film producing body of NIRT now operates under the name Sima Film and works very much the same way that Telefilm worked before the revolution.

In the early 1980s, with the pressure to mobilize a significant portion of the population for the war, the regime was once again in need of the masses. As Susan Siavoshi argues, this helped some of the radical and economically leftist factions assume positions of power, which they used to create a relatively more open cultural environment. This is the “factionalism” of the Islamic Republic that, as Siavoshi argues, “provided an opportunity for intellectuals to engage the state in a process of negotiation and protest, cooperation and defiance, in pushing the boundaries of permitted self-expression.”¹³¹

The second wave of the Iranian New Wave was therefore established in the early years of the 1980s, with Mohammad Khatami as the head of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. In the process of redefining the role of cinema, the Ministry set two goals: the first was to create a national and participatory cinema; the second was to import only “worthwhile” foreign films. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad observes this change, seeing it not as a result of an organized cultural endeavor but rather as a movement

¹³¹ Sussan Siavoshi, “Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Publication.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 509.

based on the social needs within society itself. She explains that a new vision and drive was introduced to Iranian cinema. Despite discussions on shutting down the film industry altogether or burning cinemas and/or the fact that cinema was seen as a corrupt being, this new vision helped to revive cinema. She also stresses the impact of the roles of some key figures such as Fakhroddin Anvar, Mohammad Beheshti, and Alireza Shoja'noori, the people who established the *Bonyad-e Farabi* (Farabi Cinema Foundation), which functions as an executive division to the MCIG. Significantly, they were a group of religious intellectuals who did not look at cinema in the same way as it had been seen by those involved with Iranian popular cinema before the revolution. The call for a different and much more meaningful cinema was not only implemented by the authorities, it was also a belief shared by a large number of the filmmakers who stayed and continued making films. As Dr. Ali Shariati wrote before the revolution, "Art of today, in opposition to the past, does not remain an amusement; rather, it is to build something higher than the human being and humanity. This is a mission and a trust."¹³²

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad confirms this responsibility of the artist and says that, for her, cinema is not the aim but the tool. She adds that in countries such as Iran, where the podiums are not loud enough and democracy is not yet fully institutionalized, artists, and not just filmmakers, are put in a responsible situation when taking the podium. This responsibility can bring awareness, warning, or a simple jolt for the policy makers. Sometimes it is used as a mirror reflecting the untold truth of society.

¹³² Ali Shariati, *What is Art* (New York: Mizan Press, 1979), 17.

What Dabashi observes as a paradox¹³³ and calls “bad intentions” in the following passage perhaps can be explained through what Siavoshi called the “factionalism” of the Islamic Republic as well as the similar goals and intentions of the new people who entered cinema in the post-revolutionary years. The new entrants included the so-called religious intellectual groups, such as Fakhroddin Anvar and Mohammad Beheshti, and later on Mohammad Khatami, as well as religious intellectual filmmakers such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Ebrahim Hatamikia, with the reminder of the people from the first school of Iranian New Wave.

Within the censorial limits of the Islamic Republic, what social, economic, cultural, or political forces combined to facilitate the birth of what many observers believe is the most significant national cinema in recent memory? To reverse the proverbial expression, the road to the paradise of Iranian cinema was paved with bad intentions. The official banning of foreign films, of Hollywood in particular, will go a long way in explaining how Islamic censorship had the unanticipated consequence of creating a considerable domestic market for critically acclaimed films.¹³⁴

Although Iranian cinema started with a new agenda and with many new and young faces, it is impossible to ignore the gradual transformation that it had been undergoing since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Besides a group of influential directors such as Bahram Beizai, Dariush Mehrjui, and Masud Kimiai, who started their careers before the revolution and continued working after the revolution, the entrance of a

¹³³ “The paradoxical rise of Iranian cinema to global celebration — competing forces thwarting and advancing it at one and the same time — points to two diametrically opposed forces domestic to the Islamic revolution and now vying for prominence over the body and soul of Iranian post-Revolutionary culture.” (Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 17)

¹³⁴ Dabashi, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 12.

group of young graduates from the College of Television and Cinema into the Iranian film industry after the revolution is quite significant. Some of the most famous cinematographers and sound engineers of the Iranian Film Industry are among the first graduates of this college; Farhad Saba and Hossein Jafarian, for example, are two of the most famous cinematographers in Iran. This school was trying to keep in touch with the most advanced knowledge in the industry; most of the professors were among the young and foreign-educated intellectuals and professionals in the field. Among these young trained professionals were a few of the first female filmmakers and film professionals. Mahvash Tehrani, the first Iranian female cinematographer, Poursan Derakhshandeh, the first female feature film director after the revolution, and Shirin Jahed, a television director, were among the first graduates of this school. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad also took courses at this college while starting her film career at the Radio and Television station.

When asked about their shift to cinema from television only after the revolution rather than before, both Poursan Derakhshandeh and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad gave two similar reasons. One was that they were both more concerned with social change and were better able to connect with documentary filmmaking as they could use the camera as a weapon and go straight to the heart of the society; and the second was that the cinema industry before the revolution kept itself quite distant from the television industry and vice versa, and crossing between the two was not a common practice. However, after the revolution, when the film industry as a whole was redefined, bridging the gap between television and cinema became much easier. Tahmineh Milani

also observed this change and explained that due to the sudden shift in the structure of the Iranian film industry after the revolution it became more accessible. Independent filmmakers including herself and the other female directors before her, who were waiting patiently behind the doors, rushed in and helped create the cinema after the revolution. On the one hand, the Islamic Republic is formed with all its associated boundaries and restrictions, but on the other hand, some of the young talented filmmakers who were in the peripheries of the Iranian pre-revolutionary film industry had a chance to move into the centre.¹³⁵

In short, what revived cinema after the revolution was a combination of the fact that cinema became more accessible and therefore talented people from all walks of life could join the industry, and the shift in the film industry and the purges after the revolution meant that those educated but marginalized figures in the peripheries managed to gain prominence. This is very important to understand. Although many new directors and writers joined the film industry in the post-revolutionary years, the film industry was not entirely running on untrained and fresh talent. In fact, most of the crew, such as the cinematographers and editors, were among the most professional and educated in their fields.

¹³⁵ Tahmineh Milani, Personal Interview. August 2008. Tehran, Iran.

Conclusion

Examining the institutional changes in Iranian film industry since the 1960s and utilizing a Feminist Historical Institutional approach, this chapter managed to look at both formal and informal institutions that one way or another helped change the Iranian film industry over the years. In an article entitled “New Institutionalism through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism” the authors explain “the object of inquiry in institutional analysis as a continuum between formal and informal institutions.”¹³⁶ Looking at the Iranian film industry over a span of thirty to forty years has helped in getting closer to perhaps answering questions such as, “How did the post-revolutionary cinema revive despite all the purges in the film industry?” and “Why did the number of female filmmakers increase after the revolution?”

The emergence of these small groups and institutions alongside mainstream Iranian cinema before the revolution had already created a foundation for a new cinema that was not entirely dependent on the box office revenue. Although this shift was evident in mainstream cinema and New Wave films such as Kimiai’s *Gheisar* and Beizai’s *Ragbar*, the Islamic revolution perhaps helped its acceleration. While the independent movement had to fight its way through mainstream cinema before the

¹³⁶ Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny, and Louise Chappell, “New Institutionalism through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism.” *International Political Science Review* 31 (2010): 576.

revolution, afterwards they did not have much of a competition. Mainstream cinema and its production system, after the revolution, was completely wiped out, deemed un-Islamic and promoting corruption and amorality. Many people involved in the industry were purged and, just as if a huge dam blocking the flow of a river caused the neighbouring streams to gain a bigger flow, the people involved with the independent cinema of before the revolution gained more prominence.

Among the smaller institutions introduced in this chapter is *Madresa-yi Alliyeh Television va Sinema* (College of Television and Cinema), which has a significant role in educating the backbone of Iranian cinema of after the revolution. This school and NIRT in general had a very substantial part in the increase of the number of women involved in the film industry. As discussed, two of the first and most prominent female directors, Poursa Derakhshandeh and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, the former a graduate of this school, started their careers making documentaries for NIRT before the revolution.

Understanding how the industry functions, this study now will turn to the films themselves to map these changes through the history of Iranian cinema. Chapter 3 will give a brief history of Iranian cinema with respect to the representation of women in films, and will then look at three films closely to support the argument of this thesis. These films will lay the foundation for the examination of those made since the 1990s that will demonstrate the major changes in the representation of female subjects in Iranian cinema.

Chapter 3: Captive Bodies Lost in Oblivion: Women in the History of Iranian Cinema

Introduction

The majority of Iranian films made before the revolution and in the first decade after the revolution, with some exceptions, have developed poor representations of Iranian women, and have created an unrealistic image of their lives.¹³⁷ It is only towards the end of the 1980s that a more nuanced representation of women is presented in films. This coincides with the first female filmmakers entering the feature film arena in Iran. As Naficy writes, “In post-revolutionary Iran, cinema is flourishing and women have begun to play a major role both behind and in front of the camera.”¹³⁸ This chapter offers an overview of Iranian cinema’s history with respect to the representation of women, and looks at the evolving image of women through specific examples from the

¹³⁷ Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” 215.

¹³⁸ Hamid Naficy, “Veiled Vision/Powerful Presence: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema.” In *The Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami (London ; New York: I.B.Tauris, 1994), 131.

history of Iranian cinema. Before that, this chapter will look at the evolution of the concept of “feminine” in Iranian literary works as the only media preceding cinema to do so that has also influenced Iranian cinema.

From Literature to Cinema: Iranian Women in Literary Fields

Cinema is the last of all the media that women entered in Iran. Literary fields preceded cinema, and subsequently affected cinema productions. Dabashi states that Iran “was ushered into modernity with a bang” during the Qajar era in the nineteenth century, when “Iran was in full grip of colonial powers.”¹³⁹ Various modes of resistance had been employed against the onslaught of Western-style modernity, “the emergence of a powerful narrative of *social criticism*,”¹⁴⁰ and new kinds of literary writing were among some of these influential forms of resistance. Over the years, literature has been employed to help preserve Iranian culture against the encroachment of Western influences, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, with the introduction of modern poetry and fiction writing in Iran, which were also shaped partly by knowledge of Western literature. Cinema also, although much later, joined literature and other forms of art in this movement to preserve Iranian cultural identity through the cinematic medium.

¹³⁹ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 13.

¹⁴⁰ “An avalanche of critical treatise mapped the contour of constitutional changes in the history of the Iranian encounter with modernity. [...] The principle function of these treatise was to slap Iranian political culture out of its feudal slumber.”
Ibid., 214.

Although most known key figures shaping the long history of cultural modernity in Iran are male, there are some crucial female exceptions.¹⁴¹ Among the women who helped create the Iranian feminine subject in artistic expression is one of the most gifted poets of the twentieth century, Parvin E'tesami (1907-1941), who followed the classical Persian tradition in both the form and substance of her poetry. The peak of her writing career was in the first three decades of the twentieth century, when Iran was undergoing the rapid changes that most influenced the lives of women and shifted their social status forever. Farzaneh Milani addresses the uneasy response of many women to the compulsory unveiling act in 1936, and explains that women “with their ankle-length skirts, full sleeves, loose dresses [...] have lost their security of their portable walls. [...] Uncomfortable with exposure, it is as if they preferred absence to presence, maybe because it was what they were used to.”¹⁴² She claims that this tension is also evident in the works of Parvin E'tesami, and compares this reaction “between the woman who tries to conceal her newly exposed body from men’s gaze and the pioneering poet who needs to hide her authorial identity from what she perceives as prying eyes and ears.” This enormous change and the dialectic “between self-assertion and self-denial, between self-revelation and self-concealment”¹⁴³ are best reflected in E'tesami’s body of work. However, what is also important to keep in mind is that she was a pioneer female poet entering the published world, which was previously considered a masculine world.

¹⁴² Milani, Farzaneh, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 101.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 216.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 102.

By the mid-twentieth century, as Milani affirms, a new tradition of women's poetry had come about, showing a shift in comparison to the works of poets such as E'tesami at the turn of the twentieth century. These poets "strove to reconcile the emotional, sensual, and social aspects of a female self [...]. In their works, the authorial voice is neither subordinated to stereotypes nor hidden according to prescribing rules of psychological and social distance."¹⁴⁴ Among this new tradition of poets is Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), whose works are "intensely involved in self-reflection and self-revelation, not sheltered or restrained by the anonymity or opacity of a veil."¹⁴⁵ Using the veil analogy that Milani employs to describe E'tesami's work, Farrokhzad's work can be viewed as being like an unveiled woman who is confident and no longer self-conscious of her exposed body. However, Farrokhzad's free-verse modernist poetry was "[d]enounced by some for its immorality and its advocacy of promiscuity, it has been celebrated by others for its distinctively female voice that challenges the dominant value systems of her culture."¹⁴⁶

In the world of fiction, there was Simin Daneshvar (1921-2012), who penned the first novel ever written by a woman in Iran. *Savushun* (*Mourning for Siavash*), printed in 1969, was told from the perspective of Zari, the female protagonist. The story takes place in Shiraz during the Allies' occupation in the early 1940s. Zari's husband Yusuf resists the foreigners' demands that he turn over his crop to feed the occupying army, in order to save his own peasants from starvation. He subsequently pays for his

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 133.

convictions with his life. Talattof explains, “In her married life, Zari experiences an internal conflict. On the one hand, she is a loving wife, cherishes her children, and enjoys her beautiful house. On the other hand, she yearns for her past freedom and independence.”¹⁴⁷ In response to her need at the end of the story after her husband’s death, “she begins to emulate her husband by taking up his cause, adopting his philosophy, and following his path.”¹⁴⁸ For the first time in a modern Persian work of art, Daneshvar in *Savushun* created a central female character who was given an immense presence.¹⁴⁹

Although the female voice was introduced into literature as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Talattof argues that it was not until after the revolution that a feminist literary movement was formed. In the pre-revolutionary period, women’s work, although perhaps centering on themes related to women, emphasized more the social political issues rather than specific gender issues. For example, in the case of *Savushun*, Azar Naficy argues that Daneshvar “simplifies her heroine’s real suffering, Zari’s agony over having to choose between a husband she loves and an independence of mind she desperately needs.”¹⁵⁰ Talattof argues, “The novel forces a patriarchal notion of the revolution upon the story, a notion that associates the revolution with the territory of the father. Even when Zari is ready to

¹⁴⁷ Kamran Talattof, “Iranian Women's Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 535.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 535.

¹⁴⁹ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 214-223.

¹⁵⁰ Azar Naficy, “Images of Women in Classical Persian Literature and the Contemporary Iranian Novel.” In *The Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran*. ed. Mahnaz Afkham (London ; New York: Tauris, 1994), 125.

fully engage in the movement, her role does not transcend that of the traditional sister who dares to mourn publicly the loss of her man.”¹⁵¹ On the other hand, the post-revolutionary literary works by new female writers, as well as the post-revolutionary works by Daneshvar herself, “speak of feminism, men abusing women, the general problem of the treatment of women, and opposition to traditional marriage.”¹⁵² Historically, only the revolution in 1979 marks the division between the two different literary discourses before and after the revolution, which, as Talattof claims, “may well be responsible for the shift.”¹⁵³

In comparison to literature, cinema lags. One of the first films made by a female director is *Khaneh Siah Ast* (*The House is Black*, 1962), by the aforementioned poet, Forough Farrokhzad. Farrokhzad’s involvement in the art of filmmaking began with her joining Golestan Film Unit in 1956. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this documentary is very much ahead of its time. Although Farrokhzad’s primary legacy is her poetry, which, as Farzaneh Milani asserts, introduced the feminine voice to Iranian literary works and challenged the dominant value systems of Iranian culture through this distinctive voice,¹⁵⁴ her film *The House is Black* has also played a very important role in the history of Iranian cinema. Hamid Dabashi describes *The House is Black* as “the brilliant film inaugurating contemporary Iranian cinema,” and says that Farrokhzad

¹⁵¹ Talattof, “Iranian Women’s Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism.” 535.

¹⁵² Ibid., 549.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 531.

¹⁵⁴ Milani, *Veils and Words*, 133.

proceeds and surpasses anything that happened in her time.¹⁵⁵ Agreeing with Dabashi, Jonathan Rosenbaum also looks at *The House is Black* as the predecessor to the works of Iranian New Wave directors such as Abbas Kiarostami. Rosenbaum claims, “Farrokhzad, like later Iranian New Wave filmmakers working with non-professionals in relatively impoverished locations, created rather than simply found, conjuring up a potent blend of actuality and fiction.”¹⁵⁶ It is “a film that as Dabashi asserts, with its poetic treatment of leprosy, anticipated much that was to follow in Iranian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s.”¹⁵⁷ There were almost another two decades before Iranian cinema was to see another prominent female director, suggesting how cinema lagged behind Iranian literary works in terms of the involvement of women.

The 1960s was the most important decade for Iranian cinema before the revolution. In addition to the production of *The House is Black*, Sadr argues that it was in the mid-1960s that “the first sparks of a convincingly native Iranian cinema [were] lit.”¹⁵⁸ One of the important films of this decade is *Shab-e Ghuzi (The Night of the Hunchback, 1964)* by Farrokh Ghaffari. As discussed in Chapter 2, this film, “an intellectual analysis of the social make-up of Iranian society,”¹⁵⁹ is a contemporary adaptation from one of *The Thousand and One Nights* stories. Hunchback, an actor in a popular theatre troupe, accidentally dies, and the narrative advances with the desperate attempt of the other actors to find a way to dispose of his body. The two most celebrated

¹⁵⁵ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 222.
¹⁵⁶ Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 4.

¹⁵⁸ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 125.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁵⁷ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 27.

films of this decade are *Gheisar* by Masud Kimiai and *Gav (The Cow)* by Daryush Mehrjui, both from 1969, and which, as Richard Tapper states, are “generally agreed to mark the birth of the Iranian art cinema, called “New Wave.”¹⁶⁰ *The Cow* and *The House is Black* are two of the first Iranian films to reach an international arena, the first even to be seen by a non-Iranian audience, which is why they mark a significant point in the history of Iranian cinema.

Women and Early Iranian Cinema

Although female directors were for the most part missing from Iranian cinema until about eight years after the revolution, women have always been present in front of the camera. Cinema came to Iran as early as 1901, but it was a long time before it became publicly accessible. The first public screenings started in 1910, with the opening of the first two cinemas in Tehran, which were usually only for men. The very first cinema to show films to mixed audiences was Grand Cinema in Tehran, which opened in 1924. This theatre had a separate area designated for women to sit in.¹⁶¹

In the early years, due to the lack of technical equipment as well as inadequate financing, Iranian films were produced outside of Iran, usually in India. No Iranian women appeared in any Iranian films until the successful 1933 production of the first

¹⁶⁰ Tapper, “Introduction.” 4.

¹⁶¹ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 13-14.

Iranian talking picture *Dokhtare Lor* (*The Lor Girl*). Before this, Armenian or Indian actresses played these parts.¹⁶² Cinema was facing the opposition of the religious and traditional sectors of society to the extent that “Rohangis Saminejad, the first Iranian screen actress, who played Golnar in *The Lor Girl*, was forced to change her family name to protect herself from public scorn, and was socially ostracised because of her involvement in cinema.”¹⁶³

The resistance of religious people towards cinema is also reflected through some films made in the 1930s. One of the earliest Iranian films, which has survived to this day, is *Haji Agha Actur-i Cinema* (*Haji Agha, Cinema Actor*), from 1932, by the Armenian immigrant Avanes Ohanian, who also directed the first Iranian feature *Abi va Rabi* (*Abi and Rabi*, 1930). *Haji Agha, Cinema Actor*, as Hamid Reza Sadr says, “accurately records the changing socio-political conditions of the time.”¹⁶⁴ This silent black-and-white comedy is about Haji Agha, a religious traditionalist, whose son-in-law is a filmmaker. Haji Agha is suspicious of cinema at first, but by the end of the film, after watching himself on the screen, has slowly come to recognize its significance. The film depicts “[...] the clash between past and present, tradition and progress,”¹⁶⁵ which cinema has finally overcome. But in reality, this reconciliation did not happen until after the revolution, when cinema was stripped of what was considered to be against the Islamic ideology of the regime.

¹⁶² Issari, *Cinema in Iran*, 444-446.

¹⁶³ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

In the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), as a part of their modernization scheme, the government in 1936 implemented the unveiling, Reza Shah's most audacious social policy, to signal the transformation of the modern Iranian woman.¹⁶⁶ Along with the government's modernization plan in Iran, women themselves had started different movements to change their political and social position, and were trying to achieve a more visible social status in society, as well as trying to appear as individuals with agency in and of themselves — not simply defined by their relations to their families as mothers or wives. In regards to the relation between cinema and the position of women in Iranian society, Shahla Lahiji writes,

The film industry arrived in Iran at a time when Iranian women, after a protracted period of inertia and silence, of almost total ignorance and backwardness, were about to set off on a slow journey toward an awareness of the world, intended to shed the heavy load of antiquated tradition and custom in order to receive the social status they deserved.¹⁶⁷

But although “cinema could have worked miracles in preparing public opinion for the acceptance of social changes favoring women,”¹⁶⁸ it did not take part in these movements, and went on perpetuating “traditional” and un-dynamic representations of women. Between 1936 and 1948 Iranian cinema came to a halt; no films were produced during this period. This drawback was for a few reasons: one was the start of WWII; although Iran was supposed to be neutral, due to its strategic location in relation to the Soviet Union it was inevitably drawn into the conflict with both the allies' troops and

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶⁷ Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” 216.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 216.

the German troops occupying different parts of Iran. As a consequence, the film industry was out of resources, and due to the lack of technical facilities, Iranian films could not compete with the foreign imports.¹⁶⁹ On top of all this, Reza Shah had tightened his grip on film production since 1938, with the excuse that every film would be judged politically, and they therefore needed to paint a positive picture of the country. “These regulations resulted in alienating people from the cinema and transformed the industry into the disseminator of either fantasies or state propaganda,”¹⁷⁰ which decreased the number of non-state supported productions.

Women and the *Film Farsi* Genre

After the war, the Iranian film industry, imitating the Egyptian and Indian film productions that were quite popular with audiences in Iran, started making films with song-and-dance scenes. Iranian cinema was “rejuvenated by these melodramas.”¹⁷¹ These partly musical films usually portrayed beautiful actresses with sex appeal alongside good-looking macho male protagonists, matching the fantasies of the poor young male filmgoers. The women in these films could be of only two categories: the ones who were saved because they accepted their so-called destiny and were faithful in their duties as mothers, confined within the four walls of their homes; or “ [i]f they ventured outside, they were doomed to bring misery to society and to fall into an

¹⁶⁹ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 38.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 75.

unchaste life.”¹⁷² This conception of women took over commercial Iranian films, and resulted in the production of what became known as the *film farsi* genre, which Lahiji calls a genre of “lumpen-cabaret.”¹⁷³ These films were quite successful and resulted in the film industry producing little that did not fit into this genre. Summarizing the majority of the films of the 1950s, Sadr writes:

While post-war policies failed to bring tranquility to society, films based on the themes of forced marriage, rape, guilt, injustice and adultery produced a new form of social drama in Iran. Most of the films of the 1950s focused on suffering and victimization and last-minute rescues, sudden reversals of fortune, the intrusion of chance and coincidence, all pointed to the haphazard life of the individual unprotected by the law in an absolutist society.¹⁷⁴

There are often cabaret scene in *film farsi*, which are usually added for pure entertainment and have very little or no significance in the narrative structure. What Laura Mulvey has discussed regarding the relation between the male protagonist and the male audience’s visual pleasure in the Hollywood dramas is very much applicable to the Iranian films of this period: “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for characters within the screen story, and as erotic objects for spectator[s] within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen.”¹⁷⁵ The performing showgirl works as an agent to connect the spectator’s and the protagonist’s look without any breaks in the flow of the narrative.

¹⁷² Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” 216.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 218.

¹⁷⁴ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 75.

¹⁷⁵ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 63.

Is Gheisar avenging his pride or his sister?

As mentioned earlier, there was a shift in the films made after the 1960s; for the first time, they started to break away from commercialism and become subjects of intellectual debates, as well as starting to have some political charge. The *luti*, the *film farsi*'s protagonist, usually macho men who take the law into their own hands, “also embodied a political struggle between ordinary lower-class people and the establishment.”¹⁷⁶ *Lutis*' self-respect was gained in both fighting the tyrant and the westernized rich while remembering the poor and those in need.¹⁷⁷ Although these films were targeting the middle-class intellectuals of Iran rather than the poor, they were not much of an improvement in their representation and treatment of the image of women, in comparison with the films of the preceding years. The character of the “good woman” was introduced in these films, but still women were represented either as passive or as characters in the background. Shahla Lahiji explains this change as turning the unchaste to chaste doll figures in the films of the 1960s to the mid-1970s.¹⁷⁸

Laura Mulvey, in the essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” quotes Bud Boetticher in the section “Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look”:

¹⁷⁶ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 111.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 113.

¹⁷⁸ Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” 219.

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, which makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.¹⁷⁹

This passage explains the essence of almost all the Iranian films made in those years before the revolution, in which women as “chaste doll” figures were the motivation or starting point of the narrative, which was mostly driven by the male protagonist. This type of representation can best be seen in one of the most important films of this decade, *Gheisar* (1969), directed by Masud Kimiai. In regards to the female characters in the film, Lahiji states, “Although the film includes a number of female characters, the story could have been told without them.”¹⁸⁰ While the narrative centres on a girl who has been raped and whose brothers are driven to avenge those responsible, the girl’s character is secondary. In fact, she is only shown in a couple of shots at the beginning of the film on the way to the hospital, and within the first eight minutes of the film she dies. Although it is her loss of chastity that triggers the actions of her brothers, it is not her reputation they want to restore but their own, as her reputation is irretrievable. The uncle, after realizing why she committed suicide, says, “It is good that she is dead! Otherwise what would she answer to Gheisar and Farman [her brothers]?” In the film, the fact that she was not responsible for her own disgrace is never discussed; instead, everyone, although sad for her death, is actually quite relieved because they could not think of how she would live with the shame.

¹⁷⁹ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 63.

¹⁸⁰ Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” 220.

There are two other female characters in the film: the mother and the fiancée of the younger brother, Gheisar, the protagonist. The mother, a perfect example of a sacrificial mother, eventually dies of grief from the deaths of her children. But while she is alive she remains in the margins of the plotline, her most prominent scene being her burial. The patriarchal culture is depicted most strikingly in the mother's dialogue with her brother, especially in the first scene when the mother and the uncle are waiting in the hospital. Several times, the mother, while crying and praying out loud, wonders how she will answer her sons. The sons Farman and Gheisar are two typical *lutis* of *film farsi*. Farman, who used to be a rogue and a hoodlum, after going to Mecca for his



Figure 5 *Gheisar*, at Azam's house

obligatory pilgrimage, *haj*,¹⁸¹ has promised not to touch his knife and to stay clean. He therefore faces the men who offended his sister with no weapon, and those men dishonourably hit him with a knife from behind and kill him. Gheisar, who was working somewhere in the south of Iran, comes home for a visit to find both his sister and brother dead. “The soundtrack, a ringside bell and accompanying drums, leaves no doubt that we have entered the realm of Persian chivalry.”¹⁸² “This ringside bell is tolled only when a champion has entered the ring,” the uncle says to Farman. The ring here is the wrestling mat in the traditional Iranian gymnasium where heroes are trained, and it is associated with honour. Throughout the film, the sound of the ringside bell is the cue for the entrance of both brothers, giving them a heroic presence.

The other female character, Gheisar’s fiancée Azam, is an example of the good woman character. In several scenes during the film it is confirmed by Gheisar that she is a good and chaste girl, and that she would therefore have no problem finding another husband if anything happens to him. But what is interesting is that the camera, despite all the other scenes of the film, in one scene (Figure 5) treats her no differently from the showgirl in the cabaret (Figure 6) in the very same style of a *film farsi*.

¹⁸¹ There are usually many Islamic and religious connotations in *film farsi*. For example, in *Gheisar* not only is going for *haj* mentioned, but Gheisar also takes an old woman he had promised to Mashhad, where Imam Reza’s shrine is located. Sadr, while introducing one of the *Luti* actors of the 1960s, Fardin, argues “with the addition of a religious dimension to his character [...] his commercial appeal widened.”

Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 119.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 137.



Figure 6 *Gheisar*, in a Cabaret

In this scene Gheisar has gone to visit Azam; she is alone at home and her brother has not returned yet. She leaves the room to bring tea, and before returning to the living room starts to make a fire for the *shisha* in the backyard. Gheisar goes to the window and watches her making the fire, while she is completely unaware of being watched. Here, as per the notion that Mulvey discussed, the “pleasure in looking has

been split between active/male and passive/female.”¹⁸³ The way the shots are taken, with close-ups of different parts of Azam’s body, is identical to detail shots of the cabaret dancer. What is ironic is that Azam in this scene has not been given any more screen respect than the character of the fallen woman, the dancer in the cabaret. Azam is also performing, like the dancer, before an audience. Based on what Mulvey stated regarding the gaze and its aspects of fetishism and voyeurism, Annette Kuhn argues that pleasurable looking in the form of voyeurism is produced through cinema, involving a “lawless seeing” when the object of the spectator’s look is absent or distant and when there is “no comeback for the spectator in the form either of a returned look or other response, or of punishment for looking.”¹⁸⁴ Therefore, the voyeuristic mise en scene of the scene with Azam put her as the object of the male gaze more than the dancer in the cabaret, because an active voyeuristic act has been depicted — Gheisar is looking at Azam from behind the curtains, through the window, without her knowledge. Therefore the male character acts as a “relay” for the gaze of the male spectator. There is no risk of the female character returning the gaze, since she is unaware of it. In the dancer’s case, it is different: she is aware of the gazes of the men, and might return them. As Mulvey articulates, “The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.”¹⁸⁵ Both of these scenes fit that description, although the scene with Azam can be argued to be

¹⁸³ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 62.

¹⁸⁴ Kuhn, Annette, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 57.

¹⁸⁵ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 63.

important for the progression of the narrative, whereas the cabaret scene is completely for entertainment and easily replaceable by any other scene. Lahiji argues that the cabaret woman has no task but “to satisfy the heroes’ sexual impulses.”¹⁸⁶ In the following scene, Gheisar accepts the cabaret woman’s invitation and spends the night with her. This shows the male-dominated culture represented, while it is expected of the girls to stay chaste, and if by any reason their chastity is interrupted, as the uncle iterated, they would then be better off dead. There are no rules or taboos for the men. The hero in this film easily, with no objection, accepts the cabaret woman’s invitation. As Dabashi asserts, “Central to [Gheisar] was still the lumpen machoism of the film *jaheli*¹⁸⁷ in which the ‘honor’ of the patriarch is vested in the chastity of his female relations.”¹⁸⁸

The success of *Gheisar* was partially due to the fact that while introducing new concepts it also preserved the main elements of the earlier successful Iranian melodramas, “but replaced joy and happiness with cynicism and anger, and the traditional happy ending is derailed by tragedy, the protagonist dying at the end.”¹⁸⁹

As Sadr argues, “The negative, stereotypical portrayal of women, which cast them as either vamp or victim, led to a blanket public denunciation of women in Iranian cinema.”¹⁹⁰ Public opinion suggests that the general public’s understanding of films was

¹⁸⁶ Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” 220.

¹⁸⁷ *Jaheli* is another name for *film farsi* Hamid Dabashi has used in his book.

¹⁸⁸ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 43.

¹⁸⁹ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 28.-28.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

very limited; they might have not necessarily distinguished between a role portrayed by a woman and their real career as an actor.¹⁹¹ This was even more of an issue for the more religious audience who would not find certain types of clothing or behaviour suitable for a woman, and therefore would condemn any women who would take part in such films. This public denunciation of women in Iranian cinema may be considered as one of the reasons why after the Islamizing of the film industry in the post-revolutionary years more women entered the industry. Although this trend in the representation of women does not end entirely in the 1970s, as Shahla Lahiji has argued, “This conception of women held total sway over commercial Iranian films and even managed to dominate and infest modernist and intellectual filmmakers, and later on, like a chronic illness, to enter post-revolutionary cinema culture.”¹⁹² Although there are some exceptions, such as the films of Bahram Beizai, both before and after the revolution, the majority of the films made before the revolution represented an unrealistic image of the lives and outlooks of most women, of whatever social stratum or region, in Iran.¹⁹³

Ragbar (Downpour)

Beizai’s film *Ragbar (Downpour)*, 1972) is a counter example. Although it fits within the same style of filmmaking as the films of that era, it portrays a much more well-

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 82.

¹⁹² Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” 216-217.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 215-226.

rounded female character than most films of that time. This film is the story of two men, a wealthy butcher (Rahim) and a poor teacher (Hakimi), who are trying to win one girl's heart. The girl's character, Atefeh, is quite different in comparison to the women depicted in other films; however, she is still dealing with the same issues, such as marriage. As Lahiji explains, "The girl is a normal human being, leading a normal life and left to choose one of the suitors."¹⁹⁴ She does not fit into either of the categories, either the chaste or unchaste women, introduced above; she actually does have a voice. Atefeh's character is a seamstress at a dressmaker's shop, and provides for her old mute mother and younger brother. This film is a bridge between a comedy and drama. The main character, Mr. Hakimi, is clever, but has the clumsy features of a commoner, which makes him like the character of the fool in a play. Beizai's close connection with theatre is evident in all his films, and some critics may even characterize the acting in his films as too theatrical.¹⁹⁵ Mr. Hakimi's character wears glasses, and besides it being a handicap for instance in a street fight, it is used interestingly throughout the film to distinguish his character from that of Rahim. The glass is employed to convey the lesser direct gaze of Mr. Hakimi. This is also interestingly played with in the scene where the two men are drinking together and sharing their thoughts about Atefeh. Rahim goes and takes off Mr. Hakimi's glasses, and for the rest of the scene he is without glasses, perhaps the only time that they are truly seen as equals.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 222.

¹⁹⁵ Nasrin Rahimieh, "Marking Gender and Difference in the Myth of the Nation: A Post-revolutionary Iranian Film" in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*. ed. Richard Tapper (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 238-254.



Figure 7 *Ragbar*, opening scene when Mr. Hakimi sees Atefeh for the first time

In the opening scene, Mr. Hakimi is depicted arriving with his belongings on a carriage. Soon some naughty children come and release the brake and let the carriage loose. Mr. Hakimi, worried his mother's crystal candlestick will break, runs after the carriage. But as soon as he manages to save the crystal he sees Atefeh for the first time, and out of amazement and excitement drops the crystal. It shatters and everyone laughs at him (Figure 7).¹⁹⁶

In *Ragbar*, the newly appointed teacher, Mr. Hakimi, moves to an impoverished area of Tehran. It is quite clear that he comes from an intellectual and educated family; he is well spoken and most of his luggage contains books and large framed photographs of his late parents (Figure 8). On the contrary, Rahim, the butcher, lacks manners and speaks like a rogue. Although he is supposed to be the antagonist, besides his rough edges Rahim is a very kind-hearted man who has been waiting for Atefeh for years to say yes to his marriage proposal. He has also rented one of his flats to her family for very little money in return. Mr. Hakimi communicates his love openly to Atefeh and she shows that she shares his feelings. Although Atefeh clearly admits her love for Mr. Hakimi, she feels indebted to Rahim for all his kindness and is under pressure because

¹⁹⁶ Atefeh's character is played by Parvaneh Masumi, who remains one of the great assets of Iranian cinema to this day. Fortunately, unlike many other film stars of the pre-revolutionary era, her career did not stop after the revolution. Pouran Derakhshandeh, First personal interview. July 2004. Tehran, Iran. In a casual conversation with Pouran Derakhshandeh before our interview I raised my surprise at how the actress in a popular film such as *Ragbar* could continue her career after the revolution; she responded that she must have accepted the *hijab* quite early on (referring to the early months after the revolution when not all people started to wear the *hijab* by their own will before it became compulsory). She also added that in all her films she only plays a very chaste and innocent character (she actually used the word "clean" to describe the films she had performed in).

she also has to take care of her family, and she is uncertain of the life she would have with a poor teacher.



Figure 8 *Ragbar*, Mr. Hakimi's family photographs being taken into his flat

In a scene while talking to her mute mother, she says if she was alone with no other responsibilities she would have picked Mr. Hakimi. Throughout the film we witness her internal conflict of *what she wants* versus *what she needs to do* and *what will come next*. These points differentiate this film from other films of that era. Her character has agency; not only does she have a voice, she is also not completely obeying what is expected of her. One of the secondary female characters is her boss at the dressmaking shop who constantly asks her to listen to her heart, and in the final scene encourages her to go after Mr. Hakimi.



Figure 9 *Ragbar*, Final scene when Mr. Hakimi is forced to leave.

The film's resolution is left to interpretation. As viewers, although we don't get the satisfaction of seeing her running into Mr. Hamiki's arms (who is forced to leave the area because he is transferred to another school), it is also quite unclear as to whether

she will then marry Rahim or not. In the end, despite the desire in her eyes that speak her heart, akin to the end scene of a Hollywood melodrama, she decides not to leave with Mr. Hakimi (Figure 9). This scene almost resembles a journey to death for Mr. Hakimi. The big man with the dark glasses looks like the grim reaper on a mission to take him out of there. Everyone's reaction is almost the same as if it was his coffin passing by. Some people also start walking behind him and his carriage.¹⁹⁷ The fact that he fades away also adds to this notion, which could be an emphatic realization that losing one's love is equivalent to being dead. But, looking at it in terms of the male gaze, it is very interesting that the man who is taking him away wears big dark glasses and he is prohibiting him from staying. When Rahim comes to say goodbye he asks why is he leaving; Mr. Hakimi points at the big man in glasses and Rahim says, "Oh, so you have to go." At the top of the road before he leaves, he pauses one last time, takes his glasses off, and cleans them, hoping perhaps that Atefeh will come. She doesn't, and he leaves.

¹⁹⁷ It is customary in the Islamic Shiite ritual that if you witness one dead being taken for burial to walk behind it at least for seven steps. It seems that is what those people with sad faces are doing behind Mr. Hakimi's carriage.



Figure 10 *Ragbar*, Mr. Hakimi moving his belongings



Figure 11 *Ragbar*, Rahim shaking hands with Mr. Hakimi

This film is visually quite superior to many films of this time. The framing and lighting has been employed artistically (Figure 10). For instance, in the introduction scene when Mr. Hakimi arrives, Rahim, also his landlord, comes to welcome him; their handshake is shot so that we see Rahim's reflection in a mirror, putting him in a power position (Figure 11). A great deal of attention is given to shadows and the play of light and dark in many scenes, and the black-and-white nature of the film is used to perfection. In a scene after Mr. Hakimi's love for Atefeh is revealed, she goes to return a dress to Mr. Hakimi's neighbour, who encourages Atefeh to walk into Mr. Hakimi's room to see how he lives. It is a very romantic and sensual scene without really showing much. She walks up the stairs and goes into the room; the scene is in darkness, with only a streak of light on Atefeh's face. After a bit of a wonder in his modest room she goes and sits on his bed, which in a way implies her affection for him as well, because the bed is one of the most intimate locations in a house (Figure 12).



Figure 12 *Ragbar*, Atefeh going into Mr. Hakimi's room

Despite this scene being one of the most sensual scenes of the film, she is not sexualized the way the female protagonist was sexualized in *Gheisar*. There are many close-ups in this film, but they are not objectifying Atefeh. The whole plot revolves around her, but the camera treats her with respect, the same way both of the men do.

Ragbar is Barham Beizai's first feature-length film; he made two short films prior to this one. Looking at all his films to date, we can see that he has a very distinct style, due to both his unique method of storytelling and the rendition of his narratives. This film is especially interesting to look at because although early traces of his style are evident, we are also able to see what school of filmmaking he was interested in as a student of cinema. The film bears many aspects of the Italian neorealist genre; there are many scenes in the film that must have been shot in the real locations with real people, such as the scenes at the school with all the school children in the yard at recess (Figure 13).



Figure 13 *Ragbar*, School yard

His interest in theatre is also evident through two scenes in this film that pay homage to two very famous scenes from two famous musicals. One is an homage to the most memorable scene of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), where Gene Kelly's character sees Debbie Reynold's character home after their all-nighter of thinking about how to save their last flop by turning it into musical. After he drops her off is when he sings "Singin' in the Rain" and dances in the rain. In *Ragbar*, Mr. Hakimi, who has been denying his

love for Atefeh for some time and has been set up with his boss's daughter, leaves their home without saying goodbye. He starts running in the streets during a downpour (hence the title of the film). He shows up at Atefeh's work and her boss, who is a romantic, forces her to leave and go home with him. They walk together in the rain, exchanging their deepest feelings. This scene is accompanied by the film's theme music. The conversation is not heard, but their happy faces and the chemistry between them speak volumes; there is no need to know exactly what they must have said to one another. When dropping her off, unlike in *Singin' in the Rain*, he goes in and they talk to her mother for a bit. But then he comes out and happily walks down the road in the rain in the same fashion Gene Kelly leaves Reynold's home. In this scene there is even a policeman stopping him the same way a policeman warns Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain* (Figure 14, Figure 15).



Figure 14 Ragbar, *Singin' in the Rain* homage



Figure 15 *Singin' in the Rain*

The other scene that is quite interesting, especially in the development of the narrative, is the scene that shows the two rival suitors spending a joyful night out together, after all the struggles between them. Rahim invites Mr. Hakimi for a drink, even kicking everyone else out of the tavern to give them privacy, and they drink all night together and talk about their love for Atefeh. Then they walk the streets, drunk in the dark together. This scene very much resembles the scene in Norman Jewison's

Fiddler on the Roof (1971) when Tevye (Topol) goes to have a celebratory drink at a tavern with his supposedly soon to be son-in-law “the butcher,” and after a full song-and-dance scene talking about Tzeitel, they end up walking home together drunk (Figure 16, Figure 17). What makes these similar on different levels is the sympathy both of the characters have for one another in both of the films. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye, who wants to marry his daughter off in order to gain a son, expected to have a much younger son-in-law than himself, but goes along with it anyway because he can be sure his daughter will always have plenty due to the butcher’s wealth. In *Ragbar* the two men are both in love with the same woman, but they both agree that no one but their opponent truly understands their pain because they are also sharing it.

Although *Ragbar* has a more nuanced approach to the same topic of marriage as *Gheisar*, it is an exception among the female-centric films made before the revolution. Most of the films that are known as *film farsi* follow Lahiji’s description in their female representations and offer one-dimensional female characters of either chaste or unchaste repute. This mode of representation is continued until the Islamic revolution. Implementation of the Islamic ideology did not change this approach, but cut the unchaste characters altogether.

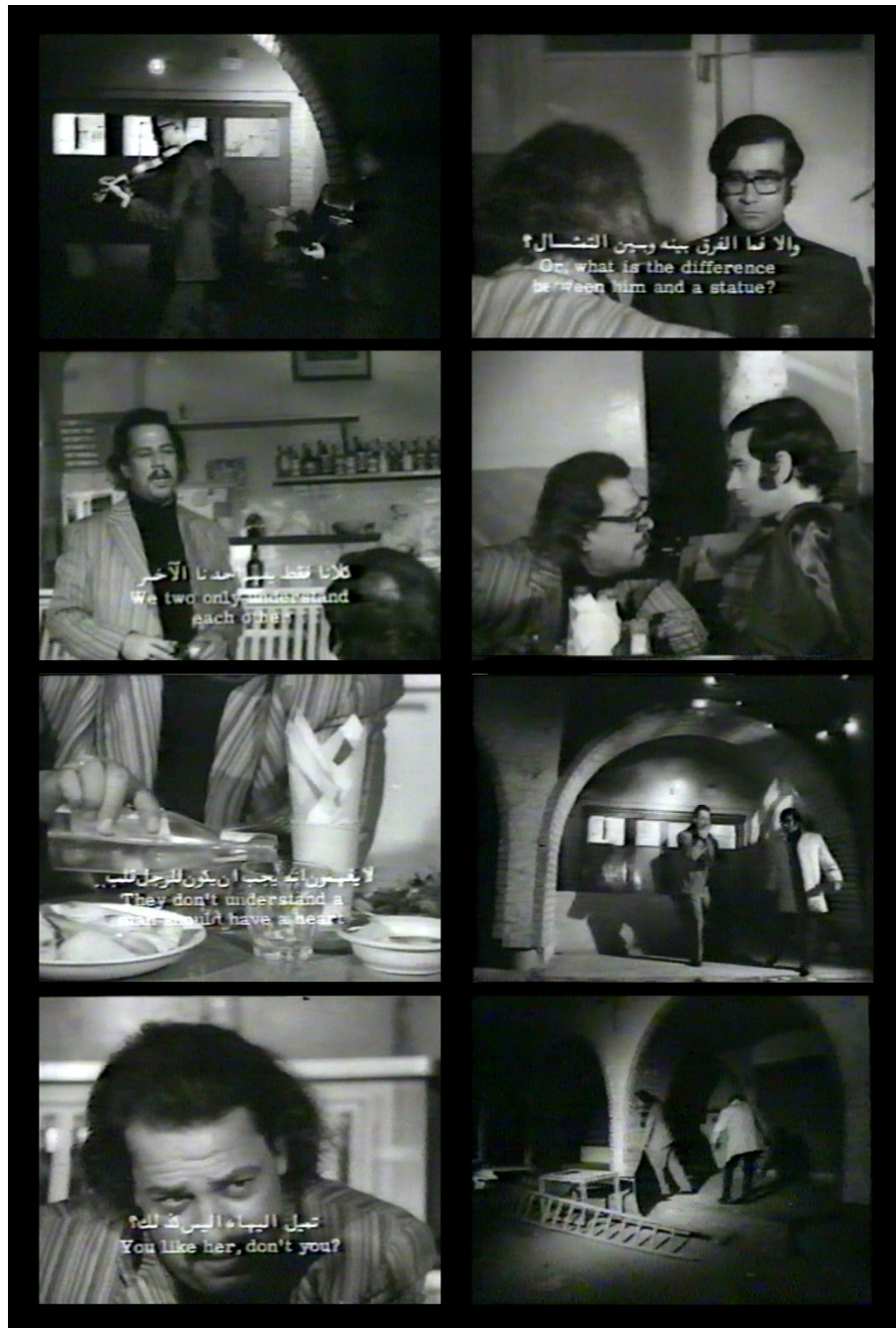


Figure 16 *Ragbar*, Homage to *Fiddler on the Roof*



Figure 17 *Fiddler on the Roof*

The Unchaste Woman: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema

After the Islamic Revolution, the *ulema* who had either rejected or ignored cinema up until then had to make a decision regarding the future of cinema in Iran.

They could either forbid it or take it under their full control and Islamize it.¹⁹⁸ Although they had rejected cinema during the previous regime, they were very well aware of the cultural significance of cinema, as this famous quote from Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution in Iran, suggests: “Cinema is one of the manifestations of culture and it must be put to service of man and his education.”¹⁹⁹ As a result, the objectives of the film industry shifted, and films became closely supervised by the religious authorities. Hamid Naficy explains that by incorporating a complex system of modesty at all levels of the motion picture industry, these authorities attempted “to disrupt the direct discursive link between the representation of women and the promotion of corruption, amorality, and pornography, which the Pahlavi era’s cinema is said to have established.”²⁰⁰ This helped to legitimize the film industry, even in the eyes of the more religious and traditional sectors of society, and consequently a larger number of women began to participate in cinema because it was no longer socially viewed as unsuitable for them. This also resulted in a significant reduction in the number of popular actors and actresses involved in the film industry of the pre-revolutionary era.

As Naficy argues, “... the clerical elite seem to have subscribed to a ‘hypodermic theory’ of ideology whereby, similar to Althusser’s formulation, the mere injection of ideology transforms an autonomous and ethical ‘individual’ into a

¹⁹⁸ Naficy, “Veiled Vision/Powerful Presence: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema.” 131.

¹⁹⁹ Khomeini qtd. In Richard Tapper, “Introduction.” In *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 6.

²⁰⁰ Naficy, “Veiled Vision/Powerful Presence: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema.” 131.

dependent, corrupt ‘subject.’”²⁰¹ In addition to the thematic and ideological changes in the films after the revolution, there were some other changes implemented as well: women could no longer be portrayed without proper *hijab* (modest clothing, including a head covering), and any physical contact on screen between actors of the opposite sex was banned. Furthermore, “Muslim women must be shown to be chaste and to have an important role in society as well as in raising God-fearing and responsible children. In addition, women were not to be treated like commodities or used to arouse sexual desires.”²⁰² Consequently, and as noted previously, Iranian cinema was brought to a halt right after the revolution in 1979, and it took one or two years until it re-emerged, having implemented the necessary new changes. At this time, the government also took over most of the economy of filmmaking. Although this made it difficult for filmmakers to freely express themselves through films — as explained in the previous chapter, after the revolution everything had to be passed through filtration and strict censorship before it could be approved and funded for production — it also helped to revive the film industry. After the revolution most of the private funding bodies and producers were purged and therefore they were no longer able to work with the film industry. If the film industry in Iran had not been supported both financially and ideologically by governmental agencies, it could have disappeared completely after the international sanctions and as a consequence of the war with Iraq. This close supervision of cinema by governmental agencies has continued into the present day. Today, the very means by which the film industry survived has come to be seen as

²⁰¹ Naficy, “Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update.” 27.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 46.

limiting Iranian cinema, because filmmakers do not enjoy freedom of expression through their works and must abide by the strict guidelines that have been set for them.

The image of women in films went into a drastic transformation right after the revolution, for it was "...in the portrayal and treatment of women that the tensions surrounding the Islamization of cinema crystallize[d]."²⁰³ Yet the female subjects in the post-revolutionary years, although quite different from the female subjects of pre-revolutionary films, did not initially reflect the social realities of women in Iranian society. Films made before the 1990s still mostly portrayed idealized images of women, and they continued to keep the female subjects in the margins of the frame and narrative, and "women rarely were the bearers of the story or the plot."²⁰⁴ Of the two categories of women Lahiji identified in the pre-revolutionary films, the chaste and unchaste women,²⁰⁵ the female subjects tainted by unchaste living completely disappeared, giving way to angelic female characters who were sacred mothers and wives. Women could only portray "good" characters; they could be the victims, but they could never be the victimizer or the exploiter.

A great number of war genre films emerged right after the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. The war films, mostly made in the 1980s, were typical of war cinema in general through their focus on narratives centering on the courage of the soldiers on the battlefield. The films either depicted the war from the frontlines, with the action

²⁰³ Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update." 46.

²⁰⁴ Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema." 132.

²⁰⁵ Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979." 216.

centering on war scenes, or they depicted the war from the homefront. In both cases, female characters were used as simple props to bring affection and support to the soldier protagonists. The women were weak and undeveloped characters, and they would never show any objection to their spouse's decisions; their role was to wish for their victorious return, a wish that was represented both literally and metaphorically.²⁰⁶ Perhaps the need for these types of propaganda films as a result of the circumstances of the war is a reason for the delay in the representation of fuller women characters in Iranian cinema generally.

The 1990s are often called the golden years of Iranian cinema; the number of films reaching international film festivals was the highest ever achieved, and at the same time subjects relating to women were depicted more realistically than ever before. In response to the years of one-dimensional portrayals of women in Iranian films, a generation of female directors turned their focus onto the complexities of the lives of women in Iran, helping to revive the woman's screen identity. Looking at the works of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, one the most prominent female writer/directors in Iran, we encounter a director interested in portraying a variety of social questions, affecting both men and women, through her socially critical films, which invariably focus upon a

²⁰⁶ The role of women in the victory of the Islamic revolution: 12 July 1980 (21 Tir 1359 AHS), Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project, <http://www.al-islam.org/position-women-viewpoint-imam-khomeini/5.htm>. Accessed Jan 9, 2011.

female protagonist. Bani-Etemad, as Dabashi argues, effectively counters the legacy of generations of both the over- and de-sexualization of women in Iranian cinema.²⁰⁷

The un-prescribed portrayal of women is not only confined to the films made by female directors. There are a small number of male directors who have also been effective in creating the new image of Iranian women in cinema. One director who portrays women in a more complex and nuanced manner is Bahram Beizai, mentioned earlier. Most of his films are centered on a strong female character. For example, one of his films after the revolution, *Bashu: The Little Stranger* (1986), as well as having an anti-war and anti-racist message, shows an example of an independent woman, a mother of two young children, who is managing both the work on her farm and in the house while her husband is away, perhaps at war. In addition, the veteran director Dariush Merjui has also made a number of films revolving around female characters, and introduces different aspects of the lives of women in Iran.

Since the 1990s, cinema in Iran has caught up with social changes and has been portraying women's issues with greater complexity. While perhaps the sudden increase in the number of Iranian female directors is not the only reason for this change, it has certainly played a very important role in this evolution. As Laura Mulvey has expressed, "A new cinema needs to be built with women behind the cameras, figuring out — as

²⁰⁷ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 228.

creators of cinematic images themselves — new representations of women which would not be, in Shahla Lahiji's terms, those of chaste or unchaste dolls.”²⁰⁸

With regards to the position of women in general after the revolution, Afsaneh Najmabadi observes the following:

The legal and social restrictions that have [been] faced in Iran since the 1979 revolution are widely reported. [...] Women are far from legal equals of men. [...] Many secular feminists continue to feel silenced, if not repressed or exiled, by the dominant cultural and political climate. Yet the past decade has also witnessed an incredible flourishing of women's intellectual and cultural production. [...] [N]ot only have women not disappeared from public life, they have an unmistakably active and growing presence in practically every field of artistic creation, professional achievement, education and industrial institutions, political participation, and even in sport activities.²⁰⁹

She proceeds to argue that although all these achievements for women may partly be in spite of or against the Islamic republic, they are not entirely dependent only on the oppositional energy against the dominant discourse in Iran. Rather, “the rise of the Islamic movement in the 1970s in Iran signified the emergence of a new political sociability and the dominance of a new discourse, within which woman-as-culture occupied a central position.”²¹⁰ Although this point of view may not be the most popular, since many scholars such as Afkhami only dwell on the negatives, it does to some extent explain the positive changes in the Iranian film industry without denying

²⁰⁸ Mulvey, Laura, afterword to *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 259.

²⁰⁹ Najmabadi, “(Un)Veiling Feminism,” 30.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

the less positive changes. Afkhami, who explains most of the achievements by women with regards to their increasing defensive power, states that after the establishment of the Islamic Republic some of the laws and rules relating to the recently acquired rights of women were rewritten. Women were forced to leave the job market and lost ground in the struggle for gender equality, in addition to the enforcement of *hijab*.²¹¹

One of the first and foremost changes invariably addressed in any debate on women in Iran since the revolution is the implementation of *hijab*. This is ironic because, as Naficy argues, the number of women involved in the film industry has increased since the Islamic revolution, partly because of the “incorporation of a complex system of modesty (*hijab* in its widest sense) at all levels of motion picture industry and in the cinematic texts.”²¹² This passage explains the significant influence of the implemented system of modesty in the early years after the revolution; it helped to cleanse the film industry of any of the connotations of amorality, corruption, and pornography that were associated with the Pahlavi-era cinema. Although this has somewhat paved the way for women to enter the film industry, it has also posed a challenge for the filmmakers to freely express their ideas on the screen. Lahiji in this respect has noted, “Iranian women’s dress cannot and should not prove a barrier to their activity both in front of and behind the camera. The headscarf should not go so far as veiling human identity.”²¹³

²¹¹ Afkhami and Friedl, *In the Eye of the Storm*, 5-18.

²¹² Naficy, “Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema.” 131.

²¹³ Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” 226.

Naficy reiterates the above argument:

...the ways of seeing which the dominant patriarchal and Islamic ethos engenders is very complex and contradictory: at the same time that it oppresses women, it empowers them. A positive effect of the incorporation of modesty at all levels of motion picture industry and in the cinematic text has been the direct discursive links previously established between cinema, women, corruption, and pornography. Thus 'purified,' the film industry in recent years has become open to women as a proper profession so long as the 'Islamic' codes of behaviour are observed, and so long as women directors adopt a male point of view.²¹⁴

I would like to address this point here because I will use a different argument with regards to the works of Pouran Derakhshandeh that may sound similar to what Naficy has stated above. While one can agree that Derakhshandeh's works do not easily give away that the director behind the work is a woman, this does not mean that she has adopted a male point of view. Although I do not agree with the fact that the female filmmakers had to adopt a male point of view in the filmmaking techniques, I believe that artists, male or female, can take a feminine or masculine position or can adopt either as they choose in expressing their ideas. Just because someone is male or female, it does not mean they will have a predetermined feminine or masculine voice. If Naficy uses this argument based on the works of female directors who do not necessarily have a feminine voice, this can be compared to Parvin E'tesami's poetry, which has been described as "manly," even by her admirers. Milani argues, "When men celebrated her achievement, most have done so through a prism that either restricted creativity to men

²¹⁴ Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema." 149-150.

or acknowledges the value of E'tesami's creativity but unsexes and resexualizes her. Granted literary value, denied her womanness; allowed her gender, she is refused her talent."²¹⁵ In response to why her poetry was regarded as manly, Manucher Nazer states, "One of the reasons is the power and eloquence of her words. But this itself is the consequence of two other causes. First, it is because Parvin was a pious woman with a solid faith in God and creation. [...] As for the second and main reason, she paid attention to eternal and universal truth which does not discriminate between men and women and addresses the whole [of] humanity."²¹⁶ Therefore it was E'tesami's artistic choice, whether based on her religious or personal reasoning, to use a language not generally regarded as feminine in her poetry. This is also true for other female filmmakers. Some, like Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Tahmineh Milani, have adopted a more feminine voice in delivering their narrative, while Derakhshandeh has not. This difference, as mentioned earlier, is also evident in Forough Farrokhzad's poetry versus Parvin E'tesami's poetry.

Despite the pre-revolutionary films, the post-revolutionary films in Iran do not follow the same model as those examined by the Western feminist film scholars; although they may originate from the same place, they usually deviate from that course and end differently. Nevertheless, these existing studies provide a useful starting point from which to study Iranian post-revolutionary films. As already suggested, one of the biggest differences in distinguishing the films after the revolution from the films made

²¹⁵ Milani, *Veils and Word*, 107.

²¹⁶ Manucher Nazer qtd in Milani, Farzaneh, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 107.

before the revolution is the treatment of women and depiction of the sexuality associated with them. This difference not only affected the way women were depicted in the films but also affected the storylines and the narrative structure.

As Mulvey stated, despite the fact that the authors of the Islamic censorship rules had no interest in films' aesthetic or the avant-garde tradition, both "were wary of the overt sexualization of femininity associated with Hollywood and its world domination."²¹⁷ In the post-revolutionary years, the import of Hollywood films was drastically decreased while domestic films were only depicting women as chaste characters in important social roles, i.e. as respectable mothers, wives, and daughters.²¹⁸ As Claire Johnson argues, it is not enough "for cinema to offer a more positive role for women, or for women to operate collectively to produce more 'realistic' female images, for film-making to be transformed."²¹⁹ Although what Johnson considers positive may not be the same as what the Islamic ideology considers positive, what is important here is the fact that both groups sought the need for change in the image of women. The Islamic modesty codes were implemented to change the pleasurable image of women on screen (as well as in society), similar to what feminist film scholars criticized as the visual pleasure in looking at women as objects. As Linda Williams argues, "To Mulvey, only the radical destruction of the major forms of narrative pleasure so bound up in

²¹⁷ Mulvey, afterword to *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, 258.

²¹⁸ Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update." 38-47.

²¹⁹ Sue Thornham, Introduction to *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 12.

looking at women as objects can offer hope for a cinema that will be able to represent not woman as difference but the differences of women.”²²⁰

In implementing the Islamic modesty codes, in Naficy’s opinion, a new way of seeing and the gaze was introduced, different from the notion of the gaze initially introduced by Mulvey. Hamid naficy argues that the imposed codes of modesty on Iranian cinema has not only not decreased the aspects of “voyeurism and its obverse, exhibitionism (unveiling), but also [increased] a culture of surveillance.”²²¹ He then applies Annette Kuhn’s argument that “[a]ctive scopophilia demands, in its pleasurable aspects, a distance between subject and object, in that it is in the play of absence and distance that desire is activated.”²²² He explains that “veiling and the system of looking which has developed to deal with it hide aspect of women [...] create the necessary distance that motivates and promotes pleasurable looking into an erotic object.”²²³ In his opinion, therefore, it is not the actual implementation of *hijab* that helped change the image of Iranian women, although, as mentioned earlier, this may have been one of the reasons for more women entering the Iranian film industry.

Mulvey, referring to the Iranian New Wave cinema states, “...the revolution has, even if accidentally, generated the conditions in which innovation becomes an essential

²²⁰ Linda Williams, “Something Else Besides a Mother: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama.” *Cinema Journal* 24.1 (1984): 6.

²²¹ Naficy, “Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema.” 141.

²²² Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 57.

²²³ Naficy, “Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema.” 141.

element in cinematic practice.”²²⁴ This innovation, along with the increase in the number of female directors, has helped to change the image of the Iranian woman by exploring new ways of seeing and storytelling. But in summarizing the characteristics of the Iranian New Wave, she mainly gives a description of Iranian art cinema, such as the work of Abbas Kiarostami, which doesn’t necessarily include works by innovative female directors such as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Tahmineh Milani. Mulvey summarizes the characteristics of Iranian New Wave as it “shrinks in scope and expands in time, moving away from dramatic plot, action or romance into scaled-down events and locations-based stories of great simplicity. With a shooting style that tends to avoid close-ups or shot countershot, the camera takes on an equivalently greater importance, and its relationship to what it sees enters into the picture, breaking down the cinema’s conventional transparency.”²²⁵

Arguably, the works of these female directors, although they do not fit in the art cinema genre, are part of the Iranian New Wave cinema. Most of their works, if not all, fit in the melodrama genre and are plot-driven, and this has not prevented them from offering a new way of seeing and storytelling. As Johnson argues “... the truth of our [women] oppression cannot be ‘captured’ on celluloid with the ‘innocence’ of camera: it has to be constructed/ manufactured.”²²⁶ The female filmmakers in Iran have employed the conventional methods of popular cinema and have re-modeled it according to their needs, instead of turning to more avant-garde methods of filmmaking

²²⁴ Mulvey, afterword to *The New Iranian Cinema*, 259.

²²⁵ Ibid., 259.

²²⁶ Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema.” 37.

that would then access a limited number of audiences. Perhaps they also agree with Johnson's point of view that "[t]he danger of developing a cinema of non-intervention is that it promotes a passive subjectivity at the expense of analysis. Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected."²²⁷ Johnston believes that in order for women to counter their objectification in the cinema, in the women's cinema the ideas of entertainment cinema should inform the political cinema and vice versa, creating a two-way process.

Madian (The Mare)

Before moving on to the films that portray the progress of change in the representation of women, this thesis will look at one more film, *Madian (The Mare)* from 1985²²⁸ by Ali Zhekan. Born in Tehran in 1950, Ali Zhekan started his career in cinema as an amateur actor in 1968 and then moved to directing more than a decade later. *Madian* is his directorial debut.

²²⁷ Ibid., 37.

²²⁸ In the end credits the production date is 1984, but it was entered in the Fajr International Film Festival in 1985, and the Soureh website, which has the directory of Farj Film Festival and the films entered, has dated the film as 1985. The IMDB website gives it 1986. As the film date is usually when the film is first premiered, this study uses the Fajr Film Festival's date. Soureh website. www.sourehcinema.com/Festivals.SelectedPeople.aspx?FestId=138112210000. Accessed Jan 2012.

This film was a late addition to this thesis, but its appropriateness for inclusion is based on two reasons. First, two out of the three female directors I interviewed, Pouran Derakhshandeh and Tahmineh Milani, mentioned this film as soon as I explained what my project was, before we started the interview. They both agreed that this film should be counted amongst points of departure for this study. Two, because although this study talks about the films made in the first decade after the revolution, it does not look at any specific examples, so it seemed appropriate to include an example from this period as well. This film is a good example because it is neither by one of the famous directors who started their career before the revolution, nor it is one of the films that has been mentioned in all the scholarship on Iranian cinema. But it is a film that stayed with two major filmmakers who started their careers around the same time as the production of this film. It is also a film that, as a child growing up in the 1980s, I remember watching on TV, perhaps as one of the films shown on a Friday (Iranian weekend) early evening on channel one. I even vaguely remember seeing it more than once, which is not surprising: in Iran during the 1980s and early 1990s, every film was shown at least twice on TV within a year or two.

There are some visual similarities between this film and *Bashu, A Little Stranger* (Bahram Beizai), which is analyzed in Chapter 6, because they are both mainly shot in the same region in the north of Iran and they both share the same actress, Susan Taslimi, who also happens to play a single mother in both films. But on the whole they are quite different films, as Beizai's style is quite significant. However, this is a great treasure to be found among some very low-budget films made in the 1980s. One factor that shows

this film was made with very little money is that it was produced by the MCIG *Gilan* (the provincial Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) itself, and also that it was not shot with synchronized sound. All the dialogue is dubbed in afterwards; the main actors did their own voices, but voice actors did the supplementary characters' voices. Iranian films until recent years generally suffered from the sound-mixing, and many films such as this one suffered more because the sound is too clean — it is obvious that the voices were recorded in a studio, which unfortunately distracts the audience from the good performances.

Madian is about a young mother who has to take care of her four young children by herself. Although it is not known why and how the husband died, it is fair to assume that the film is attempting to reflect a dilemma that many families faced during the Iran-Iraq war with many men not returning home. The mother has three girls and a boy: the eldest is a 13-year-old girl, Golbuteh, then the son, age 7, and the two little girls. The family runs a rice paddy which is their source of income, but near harvest time they have a very bad storm and lose most of their crop. Devastated, she asks for help from her brother, whose crops were also destroyed, and who is pressured because he is the only breadwinner of his own family.

The film starts with the mother happily coming to call on her brother to go visit Golbuteh, who has just had a baby; the whole story is revealed as a flashback as they walk to Golbuteh's house, returning to the present when they arrive there. In a way, the film does not leave much suspense as to how the story ends, although it takes about ten

minutes to reveal the solution the uncle has to save his sister's family. On one of his weekly trips to a village nearby to buy food and sell his products, he takes Golbuteh with him. At the grocery store, he gets into a personal conversation with the middle-aged owner, Ghodrat, which changes the course of their lives. In the scene at the shop (Figure 18), while they are talking about how he does not have enough money from his crops yet and is hoping to get some food on credit, Ghodrat's wife walks in, having finished some errands, and asks what else needs to be done before she goes to get some fire logs from the forest.



Figure 18 *The Mare*, The uncle and Ghodrat in his shop

It is obvious from their interaction that they are not in a happy marriage. After she leaves the shop, the uncle turns to Ghodrat and bluntly asks how he is and whether he is happy or not. This triggers Ghodrat to confide in him and tell him how he is in pain because his wife is barren. He says he has waited for ten years, everyone talks behind their backs, and he tries to be strong, but that a man deserves to have offspring. The uncle's response in agreeing with this is, "Sure, a wife is good for children, after

all!” which sums up the position of a woman in their patriarchal minds. He then offers his niece to him as a second wife. Ghodrat is at first hesitant, but then, realizing they won’t be asking for too much *shirbaha* (gift to the bride’s mother for having nursed her, part of the marriage portion settled by the wife which is traditionally paid in cash), he accepts and agrees to give her mother a mare. This scene is very cinematic, using a lot of visual cues. For instance, in the shot when Ghodrat is talking about how his wife is childless, a woman carrying a baby on her back is depicted in the background. And during the conversation between the two men, Golbuteh is visible waiting in the background behind her uncle, almost as if she is waiting for them to decide her destiny. Also, the brief appearance of Ghodrat’s first wife dressed all in black is almost as if she is mourning; only in key sad scenes throughout the film do the women wear black, especially black headscarves.

The uncle goes to his sister and tells her the “good” news! She is of course very upset and says Golbuteh is too young to get married. In response he says the following (perhaps a proverb), which is by far the most telling line of this film: “They feed the mare straws and grains for years [a lifetime] for it one day to come to use!” He is comparing Golbuteh with a horse that has been taken care of in the hopes that it will one work for them. The irony is that they are actually exchanging her for a mare.



Figure 19 *The Mare*, Golbuteh at the neighbour's wedding

What differentiates this film from other films before this time is the fact that the young girl *does* have an opinion, and she voices it as well. Ghodrat brings the mother's *shirbaha*, the mare, a few weeks before the wedding, which makes the mother's life much easier. People in the village sometimes rent it from her to get their crops to the

neighbouring villages and run other errands. One day a neighbour borrows it to use at his daughter's wedding, to bring the bride on.

In this scene (Figure 19) Golbuteh comes and witnesses the wedding with such sadness in her eyes — here she is also wearing a black headscarf. The exchange between the mother and daughter is quite fascinating. The daughter, looking at the young groom, turns to her mother and asks why she has to marry a man the same age as her father, not someone her own age. The mother, pointing at the boy, replies that he is too young, not a man to take care of a family; but her Ghodrat, his name a euphemism for power, is a *man* and will be able to look after her forever.

She voices her opinion not only to her mother but also to the whole village and runs away on the wedding day (Figure 20). When her mother is preparing her to go to the neighbouring village where the mullah is to marry them, she insists she will not go and starts crying, refusing to leave the house. The groom and the uncle decide to bring the mullah there; as soon as they leave she runs away into the woods. When they return they start looking for her and Ghodrat finds her on a tree. She keeps yelling that she will jump if anyone comes close, and as Ghodrat starts to climb the tree Golbuteh slips, but her clothes catch and she hangs off a branch. With a rope and her uncle's help, Ghodrat brings her down safely. Scared of her bad-tempered uncle, she pleads with him to let her go, but when they get home the uncle locks her in the house and beats her with his belt. Her mother cries and asks for help from Ghodrat, who then breaks the door open and tears the uncle away from her. This is the moment when, despite all the happiness and

security the horse has brought them, the mother sees her daughter is suffering. She firmly says she has changed her mind; if her daughter's marriage is going to be like this



Figure 20 *The Mare*, Golbuteh running away

she doesn't want it to happen, so she gives back the horse. The mother's love shows she can't go through with the plan, even though it would have secured money and food for her and the other three children.



Figure 21 *The Mare*, Golbuteh's wedding

However, despite this heroic scene, the next day Golbuteh, in the uncle's words, "comes to her senses" and tells her mother she will marry Ghodrat (Figure 21). An elderly relative of theirs amends the ties, and they have the wedding and take her away. The wedding scene is symbolic, full of darkness and shadows. The men are sitting to one side and the women to the other, but because the wedding is at night the lamps are lit, casting on the walls big shadows of all the men sitting, which makes the women look even smaller than they really are. It is customary to have the wedding ceremony while it is light out, so this uncommon time — as well as the young bride's bruised face, which is very uncomfortable to watch — adds to the awkwardness and uneasiness of the wedding scene.

What also makes this film special is that it does not end here; it goes on to show that the main story of the film is the hardship ruling these people's lives (Figure 22). The next day the uncle shows up and tries to steal the horse, taking it as his prize for his good deed, but he is stopped by the mother, who has put everything on the line to protect her children. The strong personality of this woman comes out in this scene when she takes a stick to hit her own brother when he tries to push her away. As he starts to get away she runs after him, and the people in the village come and separate them, pitying both because the adverse time has forced them to stand against one another.



Figure 22 *The Mare*, Fighting over the horse

This is a good film to end this era with and move to films post-1990s. No change comes to realization overnight, but this film demonstrates the fact that films were moving towards more complex and nuanced female characters. What makes this film special is the struggle depicted between the patriarchal society and a modern society in which women have more say. Although the mother in this film did not choose her

independent life — rather, it happened to her — she shows that she is willing to take charge and depend on her own ability. The film starts with her turning to her brother (her only close male relation) for every little problem, but by the end she no longer wants to obey him, and in fact gets into a physical fight with him. She no longer needs his approval. The opening scene turning into the final scene also shows her independence; she has already set off to visit her daughter and she asks if her brother would like to go with her, while her character at the beginning would have asked him first and then set off.



Figure 23 *The Mare*, Two close-ups from the final scene of the film

In conclusion, it is worth noting, as it was discussed in the Introduction, that the concept of the “averted look” is not applicable to all the films made in Iran after the revolution; in fact, this film, which is shown widely on national TV, is an example of one that does not follow that rule. It is full of close-ups and, even in scenes of struggle, at times men and women do touch hands (Figure 22).

Conclusion

Looking at the overview of the history of Iranian cinema with respect to the representation of women, this chapter offered narrative of gender-specific development in Iranian cinema. Covering phase one of the four phases set out in my introduction, this chapter offered close readings of three films with regard to the position of female characters in their narratives. The cliché portrayal of women figures is evident in all the three films; what connect them are the importance and effect of marriage in the female character's lives. The function of the *good* woman character, which carried over to the post-revolutionary films, is not so different than that in the films made in the *film farsi* genre. What is different in the final film discussed, *Madian*, in addition to the absence of the *bad* female character, is the partial agency of women that is clearly depicted. They do voice their disapproval of the patriarchal system in which they are caught; however, they are not strong enough to change the system and they are forced to give in. The final two shots of *Madian* (Figure 23) are contrived and quite disturbing. A smile usually means contentment and happiness, and of course the mother and daughter are happy for the newborn child. However, the actresses had to hold still for sometime for this final shot: the camera first lingers on them in still frame before zooming in on their faces — a prolonged, uncomfortable shot that reveals their smiles to be artificial.

Chapter 4: Woken up with a Patriarchal Hangover: First Generation of Female Directors in the Post- Revolutionary Years

Introduction

The significant contributions of the first female directors after the revolution mark a pivotal point in Iranian cinema. Following the institutional and historical changes of the 1980s, which were explained in the previous chapters, women entered the feature filmmaking arena predominantly. As this thesis argues, the increase in the number of female directors resulted in the shift in representation of women in Iranian cinema of the 1990s. The female directors' contribution is not only because they mostly focused their lens on female subjects but also because they raised questions and challenged the patriarchal system dominant in the Iranian society. This new trend and open dialogue with the established patriarchal structures was then adapted by other Iranian directors in the 1990s. The body of works examined in this and the next two chapters are the examples of this shift in the Iranian cinema.

Critical assessments of how the concept of patriarchy has been deployed within feminist thought show that while definitions of the term vary slightly, they all address the position of women in society as subordinate to men and raise the question of why that is the case. As Veronica Beechy articulates, “the theory of patriarchy attempts to penetrate beneath the particular experiences and manifestations of women’s oppression and to formulate some coherent theory of the basis of subordination which underlies them.”²²⁹

Historically, patriarchy has been supported and reinforced by legal, political, economic and ideological structures, including religious systems.²³⁰ Directly or indirectly, these structures maintain and reinforce the ideology and reality of men’s authority over women. The patriarchal society therefore is defined as where older men have authority over others in both the private and public spheres. Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy simply in terms of a “system of social structures and practices in which men dominate and exploit women”.²³¹ But the ideological dimensions of patriarchy are considered much more complex and scholars such as Zillah Eisenstein and Maria Mies argue that patriarchy has served as a tool for the fulfilment of capitalist agendas, and that patriarchy and capitalism cannot be analyzed in isolation from each other.²³² Walby disagrees with this linkage and argues that patriarchy and capitalism are two distinct

²²⁹ Veronica Beechey. *Feminist Review*, No. 3 (1979), 66.

²³⁰ Valentine M. Moghadam. 2004. "Patriarchy in Transition: Women and the Changing Family in the Middle East." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 35:137-162.

²³¹ Sylvia Walby. *Theorizing patriarchy*. (London, England: Basil Blackwell Ltd.,1990), 20.

²³² Zillah Eisenstein. *Capitalist patriarchy and the case for socialist feminism*. (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1979). And Maria Mies. *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labor*. (New York, NY: Zed Books, 1998).

mechanisms that work to subordinate women. Walby then categorizes patriarchy into six distinct but interrelated social systems: “the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions—such as religion, the media, and education”²³³ Chandra Mohanty applies Walby’s typology of patriarchy to pre-independence India and Pakistan and observes that the colonial rulers reinforced patriarchy through gender biased land reform, and laws concerning marriage and inheritance. She also adds that the colonizers through changing of the formal system of education in the above countries also strengthened patriarchy.²³⁴

Patriarchal resistance to the education of women has been one key factor in women’s oppression, manifested differently in societies across the world. In many societies, centuries of religious beliefs, class inequalities, and colonial subjugation continue to affect education systems in ways that deter women from advancement, or from questioning established and socially sanctioned feminine roles of wife and mother.²³⁵ Many discussions of patriarchy agree that social and cultural norms and values are constructed to obstruct women’s access to institutions outside the home, including schools.²³⁶ This is quite evident even in Iran today. In the light of recent changes in the education system in Iran, due to the increase in the rate of women

²³³ Walby. *Theorizing patriarchy*, 20.

²³⁴ Chandra Mohanty. *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

²³⁵ Tanya Kenkre. *Education, economic participation and women’s status in India*. Doctoral Dissertation: (The Pennsylvania State University, 2005).

²³⁶ Rashida Patel. *Women versus men: Socio-legal gender inequality in Pakistan*. (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Jasmin Mirza. *Between Chaddor and the market*. (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2002).

attending institutes of higher education in comparison to men, “36 universities across Iran begin to ban women from 77 different majors.”²³⁷ Apparently, the ban has been put in place because of the decline in the rate of marriage, which is seen by government authorities as the direct result of women’s access to higher education, since women with higher levels of education tend not to marry men at a lower level of educational attainment. In societies such as Iran, patriarchal authority tends to keep women in their homes by creating concepts such as honour (*namus*).

As explained earlier, the generic representation of women in Iranian cinema reflects a pervasive societal attitude towards women, who are introduced as the purveyors of chastity and symbols of honour for their family. The threat of bringing dishonour to the family, through their actions, which is even more significant for young unmarried women, is best depicted in *Gheisar* through Azam’s suicide in an attempt to preserve her family’s honour.

Throughout this thesis the term patriarchy has been used both with regards to the position of women in Iranian society and the role of women in Iranian cinema. Following Deniz Kandiyoti’s formulation, this thesis defines patriarchy beyond the generic and undertheorized sense of the term introduced above. It uses the term patriarchy to refer not just to the different forms of male domination but also to the various structures and responses that this domination has taken within the Iranian context.

²³⁷“Curbs on Iran female students take effect”, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/09/201292211424417429.html>. Accessed on September 22nd, 2012.

Kandiyoti argues that patriarchy has too often been considered to be a singular set of conditions. She demonstrates instead that due to different conditions in individual societies, patriarchy expresses itself in various forms. She acknowledges the different, concrete forms and meanings that patriarchal structures can assume across specific contexts. She finds that women living within the constraints of different patriarchal arrangements make room for negotiation, in order to expand their autonomy and build strategies of resistance. The possibility of a “patriarchal bargain”, as she coins the term, allows for a “powerful influence on the shaping of women’s gendered subjectivity” and “determines the nature of gender ideology in different contexts”.²³⁸ “Patriarchal bargains” refer to the ways in which women negotiate patriarchal conditions, either in terms of negotiating specific relationships with men or more generally negotiating their position within patriarchal society. Through examples concerning roles of women in agricultural labour and marriage, she supports her argument that women negotiate concessions and benefits by performing a wide range of strategies that range from subtle forms of non-cooperation to open resistance.

This thesis looks at the portrayal of issues such as marriage, motherhood and family, all major sites of the expression of patriarchy, in the films of the 1990s and maps the changing role of women in Iranian cinema as a result of women’s negotiations and bargaining in their given patriarchal arrangements. Kandiyoti’s perspective on women’s “intensification of traditional modesty markers”²³⁹ as a reaction to a crisis in

²³⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy”. *Gender and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Special Issue to Honor Jessie Bernard. (Sep., 1988), pp. 274-290, 275.

²³⁹ Ibid., 283.

patriarchy finds much resonance when we turn to the question of women and cinema in Iran. For example, as she explains, the fact that women adapt the veil in a society like Iran may be a sign of repression; but it is a “small price that had to be paid in exchange for the security, stability and presumed respect” gained.²⁴⁰ Therefore, what some might regard as a regression becomes an effective strategy to protect and enhance women’s autonomy “within the internal logic of a given system”.²⁴¹

This chapter looks at the works of the first female Iranian feature film directors after the revolution. In the first decade after the revolution, while women were still living under the pressure of the same social values around gendered behaviour as before, slowly women started voicing their opinions more openly. This change of attitude is evident in the films of these female directors. While their characters still deal with issues of marriage and motherhood, they no longer do so silently and passively. In these films, women no longer stand in the peripheries: for the first time, they take center stage.

Pouran Derakhshandeh and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, the first two Iranian female directors, made their first feature films in 1986,²⁴² both starting their careers in cinema with a background in documentary filmmaking. Tahmineh Milani, the third female director to emerge, is about a decade younger than these two pioneers, and started her

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 283.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 283.

²⁴² “Prior to the revolution, only one woman, Shahla Riahi, had directed a feature film (*Marjan*, 1956).” (H. Naficy, veiled 133). Shahla Riahi is one of the oldest actresses in Iran who has worked in both film and television. She directed the first feature ever made in Iran by a woman director, entitled *Marjan*, in 1956. However, due to its failure at the box office she did not pursue directing, but continues to work as an actress to this day. “Zani filmi dar bari-yi zan bisazad.” Mardomak. http://www.mardomak.org/news/zan_dar_cinema_iran/. Accessed on July 10, 2008.

career in cinema in 1989. Looking at their works closely, some thematic and stylistic similarities and differences can be mapped, such as the recurrence of the mother character, and certain particular social issues that they have all addressed. There is a difference in the way Milani approaches her subjects in comparison to her contemporaries. When addressing gender issues in her works, she takes a blunt approach that is completely missing from the works of the other two female directors. This difference can be explained by the generational factor that Talattof distinguishes with regards to the literary works in Iran:

“The new literary discourse produced by post-revolutionary female authors may be argued to have been affected by generational factors. Many of these authors are younger than the ones mentioned in the pre-revolutionary period. It may also be true that the new generation has been influenced by feminist ideas in vogue in the West since the late 1960s or may have been influenced by the rise of feminist movements in other parts of the Middle East.”²⁴³

This is further confirmed by the fact that Milani does address her work and approach as a feminist, while Bani-Etemad, for instance, does not regard herself as a feminist filmmaker.²⁴⁴ More directly, then, Milani takes on issues of patriarchy as a system that shapes women’s (and men’s) actions but that also can be resisted in the encounters of daily life.

Pouran Derakhshandeh

²⁴³Kamran Talattof, “Iranian Women’s Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism.” 549.

²⁴⁴Tahmineh Milani and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Personal interviews. August 2008. Tehran, Iran.

Pouran Derakhshandeh, the very first Iranian female feature film director, was born in Kermanshah in 1951. Graduating from Madreseh Alieh Television va Cinema (the College of Television and Cinema), now called Daneshkadeyeh Seda va Sima (the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting University),²⁴⁵ Derakhshandeh started her career as a researcher and documentary filmmaker at Iranian National Television in 1974. There she began by making cultural documentaries on the traditions, costumes, and handicrafts of people in different regions of Iran. In the first couple of years after the Islamic revolution she continued to make television documentaries with the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) on topics such as depression, addiction, and poverty. Among these documentaries are *The Wheels Whirl* (1980), which presents a critical look at the economic changes after the closure of certain large industrial manufacturers, such as Iran National; and *Hemlock* (1980-82), a 17-episode documentary series focusing on addiction, drug smuggling, and ways of preventing drug abuse.

Coming from a documentary background, most of Pouran Derakhshandeh's narrative films are concerned with social and cultural issues, similar to Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's works. Although both Derakhshandeh and Bani-Etemad may have addressed similar issues in certain films, their aesthetic approaches are quite different. Derakhshandeh has a more internalised approach to the subjects, identifying the problems on an individual basis, while Bani-Etemad, although also focusing on

²⁴⁵ Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. <http://www2.irib.ir/education/history11.htm>. Accessed on June 9, 2008.

individual characters, is always targeting a wider issue within society and has a more externalised approach to the same topics. “Whereas Bani-Etemad’s style may be labelled as social realism, Pouran Derakhshandeh’s style may be designated psychological realism.”²⁴⁶ Derakhshandeh’s works usually address human relations and communication difficulties, whether due to a physical handicap or a social disadvantage. As she herself has claimed, she makes films for “all those who are internally handicapped in our society.”²⁴⁷

Derakhshandeh has ten films to her credit — a substantial number, considering the almost ten-year gap between the production of her *Zaman-e az Dast Raft* (*Lost Times*, 1989) to the production of *Eshgh-e Bedun-e Marz* (*A Love Without Frontier*) in 1998. This gap has been explained as being due to her having been unable to get approval on her scripts, as well as a lack of financial support.²⁴⁸ There is a tendency for critics to divide her works into two categories, separating the films that have been well received in film festivals both inside and outside Iran from her lesser-known films. The first group consists of her first two films, *Ertebat* (*Relationship*, 1986) and *Parandeye Kuchak Khushbakhti* (*Little Bird of Happiness*, 1987), plus her later film *Bachehaye Abadi* (*Eternal Children*, 2007). All of these films deal with children and their lack of communication, either due to bodily constraints or mental disabilities. The second group

²⁴⁶ Hamid Naficy, “Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema: The Evolution of Rakhshan Banietamad’s Films.” In *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Murray Pomerance. The Suny Series, Cultural Studies in Cinema/Video. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 47.

²⁴⁷ Pouran Derakhshandeh qtd. In Hamid Naficy, “Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema: The Evolution of Rakhshan Banietamad’s Films.” In *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Murray Pomerance. The Suny Series, Cultural Studies in Cinema/Video. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 47.

²⁴⁸ Pouran Derakhshandeh, Second personal Interview. August 2008. Teheran, Iran.

consists of the rest of her films, with the exception of *A Love without Frontier* (1998), which stands alone both because of the different subject matter and the nature of the production.²⁴⁹ The films *Ubur az Ghobar* (*Passing through the Dust*, 1988), *Zaman-e az Dast Rafte* (*Lost Time*, 1989), *Sham'i dar Bad* (*Candle in the Wind*, 2003), and *Royay-e Khis* (*Wet Dream*, 2005) comprise the second group; all are concerned with existing social and cultural problems in society.

Derakhshandeh employs a conventional cinematic style; therefore it is the subject of her films that distinguishes her work from other filmmakers. She also uses classical narrative techniques in telling the stories, as well as in the composition and editing. She does make use of melodramatic dialogue and acting in her films, which sometimes clashes with the realistic setting of the films.

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, one of the most prominent directors in Iran, was born in Tehran in 1954. Bani-Etemad makes social realist films with a focus on the problems of women in society. Between the years 1973 to 1980 she worked as the script supervisor

²⁴⁹ I chose to separate this film from her others because not only is it different because it was shot in the US using non-Iranian actors, but it is also quite different in terms of storytelling. It is because of its propaganda-like story that some critics have even called it the Iranian answer to the American movie *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) (Sadr 252). Derakhshandeh has denied any sort of attempt at this similarity from her side. In an article in *Tehran Times*, Daily News, January 13th, 2000. Jesse McKinley, "Iranian Film Is Canceled After Protest By Salinger" <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/21/movies/iranian-film-is-canceled-after-protest-by-salinger.html>. Accessed on Jan 11, 2010.

at the Iranian National Television while studying cinema at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts at the University of Tehran. Beginning in 1980 she started making documentary films for the IRIB while working on several feature films as assistant director, including works by prominent directors such as Mahdi Sabagh-zadeh, Rasul Sadr Ameli, and Kianoush Ayari.

Her documentaries were largely concerned with the lower and middle classes of Iranian society. Among some of the documentaries she has made are *The Village Migrant into the City* (1985) and *Centralization* (1987), which both depict the problems the city of Tehran has faced as a consequence of the increase in the number of migrants from the neighbouring villages and the lack of infrastructure for handling the extraordinary increase in population.

She started her career in directing narrative cinema in 1986 with three films: *Kharej az Mahdudeh* (*Off-Limits*, 1987), *Zard-e Ghanari* (*Canary Yellow*, 1988), and *Pul-e Khareji* (*Foreign Currency*, 1989). She started her directing debut with selecting among licensed scripts written by other people, as it took her some time before she could obtain permission to work on one of her own scripts. This is why although her first three films are concerned with social problems, they are not in complete harmony with the rest of her work. The turning point in Bani-Etemad's career was the film *Nargess* (1991), which also garnered her first prize at the Fajr International Film

Festival in Iran.²⁵⁰ The unity in how she uses the cinematic language and thematic connection between all her films since *Nargess* is what defines her as an auteur director. While making feature films she never abandoned making documentaries. Although there may seem to be gaps between the production of her films, it is usually because she is busy researching or working on documentaries, many of which are then used as the foundation for the scripts of her films.²⁵¹

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's films depict little bites from society, with all its ups and downs, and the people in it trying to cope with and tolerate what life has in store for them. The cinema of Bani-Etemad offers a realistic portrayal of the people in their familiar environment. She bases her scripts on real people she meets during her research and documentary filmmaking, which is why her characters are often quite tangible, with genuine problems and issues similar to those people have in real life. The documentary style of her filmmaking helps the characters belong to the environment she portrays them in. This play on reality and fiction is best seen in her film *Banuye Ordibehesht* (*The May Lady*, 1999). In the film, Forough Kia, the protagonist, is a documentary filmmaker working on a project for Mother's Day, trying to find the perfect mother to be her main subject. Bani-Etemad mixes real documentary footage she had for one of her documentary projects entitled *In Filmha ra be Che Kasi Neshan Midahid?* (*Who Do You Show These Films To?*, 1998) with fictional interviews with actors. These fictitious

²⁵⁰ This was the first time in the history of the Fajr International Film Festival that a female director won this award. Not only is it surprising that a woman won, but it is also surprising that she won it for *Nargess*, which, as it will be discussed, was seen as a very controversial film when it was released.

²⁵¹ Issa and Whitaker, *Life and Art*, 66-67.

documentary scenes include characters from her other films; a viewer who is unfamiliar with her other films would probably also accept them as factual scenes. Another interesting connection of this film is with her next narrative film: in one of the factual scenes, a mother is depicted taking care of her war-injured son since his return from the war. This mother is whom Gilaneh's character in Bani-Etemad's later film *Gilaneh* (2005) is based on.

Bani-Etemad's realist approach tends to restrict the development of her characters, but she pays close attention to the production design of her films. The set design, makeup, and costume of the characters are usually quite realistic, which helps to make the films more believable. There are evident signs of melodrama in her films, especially in the character development and dialogue. In an interview about her film *Gilaneh* she explains, "Usually what I do is that I grasp the realities of the society — of course I dramatize it, but in the process of dramatization I will try to make it as close to the documentary style as possible, so that it will reflect the reality intimately."²⁵² Another stylistic choice that she employs, which helps the realism in her films, is the use of a handheld camera. Except for a few shots, her films do not include many shaky camera moves; she makes use of the handheld camera very subtly — it may not even be perceptible by the audience when watching her films for the first time. For example, the film *Khun Bazi* (*Mainline*, 2006) is entirely shot handheld; there is no single shot in the

²⁵² Joanne Laurier and David Walsh, "An interview with Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, co-director of *Gilaneh*." 3 October 2005. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/oct2005/bani-o03.shtml>. Accessed June 2008.

film where the camera is fixed on a tripod. In her static shots she takes advantage of the slight floating move that is caused by the cameraperson's breathing to create a sense of immediacy. This allows the viewer to surpass the formality of the intervening camera and feel like an active participant, present in the scene.

Tahmineh Milani

Tahmineh Milani was born in 1960 in Tabriz, Iran. She started her film career in 1979, right after the closure of the universities in Iran. During the four years the universities were closed, she became acquainted with Masud Kimiai²⁵³ and started working as a researcher in his production company, Azad Film. She worked there for about seven years in total, which means that she continued working there even after the universities were reopened and while she was studying architecture at the University of Science and Technology in Tehran. While at Azad Film, she worked in different capacities as researcher, script supervisor, assistant director, and assistant editor. It was through the hands-on practice that she gained her filmmaking experience; she claims it to have been better than any university education. During these years she also penned her first script, *Mother, I love You*, which garnered her the first *Jahad Sazandegi Award*

²⁵³ Masoud Kimiai, born in 1941, is one of the most prominent writer/directors in Iran. He is most famous for his 1969 film called *Qaisar*, which, along with Dariush Mehjui's *The Cow* (1969), is considered one of the most significant films in the pre-revolutionary years, marking a shift in the course of Iranian cinema.

(The Ministry of Reconstruction Jihad),²⁵⁴ although the script was never turned into a film.

Tahmineh Milani finally managed to bring her first film, *Bachehaye Talagh* (*Children of Divorce*), into production in 1989.²⁵⁵ Although she was given a low budget, which forced her to use the most primitive equipment available, the film turned out to be a success. She won the award for Best First Film at the Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran that year, which helped her to get more support for her following films.

Milani usually takes on touchy topics about women's struggles in a male-run society. Her films can be divided into two groups: dramas (melodramas) and comedies. She has a total of ten films to her credit, three of which are comedies.

Milani believes in cinema as a teaching tool, she does not necessarily depict how everything is in society, but rather how everything should be. She romanticizes the situations, or implements her point of view in order to convey her message. In an interview about her first film, *Children of Divorce*, she clearly states her position as the filmmaker: "...I do my best to offer a cultural and educational model in my films. [For

²⁵⁴ The Ministry of Reconstruction Jihad, established in 1979: "The Ministry is in charge of rural development and the propagation of Islamic ideology, a mission it accomplishes by distributing appropriate films, slides, [...] throughout its vast nationwide network." Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update." 42.

²⁵⁵ She explains that for anyone who wanted to make their first feature film, they either needed to have made a couple of short films or have done some assistant directing prior to their own directing debut. She then goes on to explain how she was technically eligible since 1983 but only managed to get her permit in 1988 after Poursan Derakhshandeh with her film *Relationship* had already paved the way for other female directors. Tahmineh Milani, Interviews by Hamid Mazra'ah, *Firishtah-ha-yi Sukhtah: Naqd Va Barrasi-i Sinima-yi Tahminah Milani*, (Tehran: Nashr-i Varjavand, 1380), 37.

example,] I have nothing to do with the fact some people in the lower classes of society sit on the floor and eat by hand. I believe it is better and healthier to sit at the table and use cutlery, granted that, based on the class difference, they would have cheaper furnishings, or during the film in all the houses you see bookshelves, which I think is how it should be.”²⁵⁶

Although Milani, like Bani-Etemad, has on various occasions denied being a feminist filmmaker, she has been given the title, regardless of her denial, by many critics both inside and outside Iran.²⁵⁷ I believe that this is because she herself in many interviews speaks of the challenges regarding women’s rights, and she brings up issues that have been the topic of feminist thinkers for years. In an interview about her last film, which the reporter Collin Cosier announced as probably her most contentious film to date, she says, “A society that reduces women to mere sexual objects would have to pay a very high price for it.”²⁵⁸ In her last film, *Tasviah Hesab* (*Payback*, 2008), a group of women just released from prison form a gang and set off to deliver their own version of justice to men. They lure their victims into their traps by pretending to be prostitutes and take them to their hideout to lecture them and beat them up. The interesting question is, when she clearly has feminist tendencies both in her work and in her way of thinking, why she feels the need to deny her affiliation with the feminist tradition of thinking.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 114.

²⁵⁷ Colin Cosier, “Iran’s Fearless Feminist Film Maker.” http://news.sbs.com.au/dateline/irans_fearless_feminist_film_maker_130793. Accessed on June 2008.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

Nargess

Bani-Etemad's *Nargess* is a drama that depicts the hardship that the working class suffers from in a patriarchal society, focusing on the women in particular. The film is the story of a love triangle between a man, Adel, an older woman, Afagh, and a young girl, Nargess. Afagh housed Adel since he was a teenager, and after he grew up they got married (*Sigheh*, a temporary marriage that does not need to be registered in the identification documents). They work as thieves and peddlers of stolen goods. While on the run from the police when a job has been exposed, Adel runs into a hospital and starts assisting a girl and her father who were there to see the doctor, making the police unable to recognize him when they follow him into the hospital. In the process, Adel falls in love with this girl, Nargess, and decides to marry her. To find out whether she is also interested, before anything he pays a visit to her house and brings her a gift. Being very nervous, he does not manage to say anything to her, only gives her the gift and runs away (Figure 24). This scene reveals that Nargess is also interested in him.



Figure 24 *Nargess*, Adel pays a visit to Nargess

Traditionally, a man needs to ask his family to ask for a girl's hand on his behalf, so he visits his mother at her work at the factory. She does not receive him well as he has always been a rebellious son, and last time he visited he started a fight with his stepfather. Even before asking why he is there she tells him she has no money to give him, implying he never visits her unless he needs money. With sadness he says he is not there to ask for money. Surprised, his mother asks him why he is there, and when he tells her he wants her to help him to get married she gets angry and laughs, saying,

“Who is going to give you a wife? A man with no job and prospect.” The stepfather also joins in, they start a small quarrel, and he leaves. This very short scene with his mother hints at several issues that are not the focus of the film, but are nevertheless quite important, such as the fact that as a teenage boy he could not accept the existence of a stepfather, which perhaps triggered his leaving home and getting into the life he has now. Bani-Etemad hints at this issue in this film, and returns to it in later film, *The May Lady* (1999).

The scene with his mother and the stepfather at the factory then cuts to Adel lying down on the bed in Afagh’s house. Having been defeated in his mission with his biological mother, he does what he always does: falls back on Afagh. Afagh, who does not understand why he went to see his mother, tells him if he needed money he should have just asked. He gets very angry and snaps at her, telling her that he wants to get married. Afagh reiterates what his mother said, and he leaves her house angrily. As he leaves the house Afagh yells, “Go and never come back here again,” but as soon as he is gone she becomes very sad, taking one of his jumpers and hugging it closely as she cries. This is the method that Bani-Etemad has beautifully employed to convey their intimacy. She holds his jumper as if it is him she is embracing (Figure 25).



Figure 25 *Nargess*, The scene where Adel asks his mother to help him get married.

Afagh, who fears nothing but being alone, tells Adel she is willing to pretend to be his mother to ask for his wife's hand if he promises he will never leave her. Adel believes his only refuge from his gloomy life is through marrying Nargess, and so accepts this offer. They go to her house and ask for her hand. Adel lies and says he is in trade and he makes enough money to support his small family. Nargess' family, equally living in poverty, accepts him and asks him to take good care of their daughter. Her mother even says she wants her to be happy, as she has not yet experienced real happiness in her life (Figure 26).

After the ceremony it is customary for the bridal party to see the newlyweds to their *hejleh* (bridal chamber). Nargess' mother asks Afagh to be the mother to follow them home, because she has to stay home for her other children. Afagh feels sorry and tells Adel to take the bride to her house for the night, which is better equipped and more inviting. Afagh goes home a little earlier and makes the bed, which is very painful for her. She takes down a photograph depicting her as a young woman, admitting she has gotten old. This is a very powerful scene in the film. When the bride and the groom arrive, Afagh sits on the staircase looking down at them going into her room. Afagh looks at their shoes outside the room and puts her head between her hands, relaying the difficulty she must feel in sharing her love with someone else. This subtle depiction conveys their nuptial and her having been thrown out alone. Afagh remembers her first day out with Adel after their marriage. The flashback depicts a beautiful, young, and

fresh Afagh sitting before Adel. This scene ends with them showing their inky fingers, which declares their marriage registration (Figure 27).²⁵⁹



Figure 26 *Nargess*, The wedding scene

²⁵⁹ It is implied in the film that they are not literate; usually the people who are illiterate have to give a fingerprint instead of a signature.

After the wedding, Nargess and Adel paint and fix their modest house and create a beautiful nest. But a month later, the police come and confiscate some of their belongings, telling Nargess that Adel is in jail for theft. Nargess is shocked but manages to take charge of the situation, going to court to plead for a shorter sentence for Adel. She even lies to her family, saying he is away on business. She finally manages to cut two months of his sentence, and finds ways for him to get a job after he leaves the jail.

Meanwhile, Afagh visits Nargess and they create a bond with each other. Nargess blames Afagh for not having told her about his career, and Afagh shares her life story with Nargess, telling her that she was forced to marry an old man when she was only 9, and after she had a child he left her, taking the child. Left alone in a big city, she worked hard to stay alive, until Adel came (Nargess thinks Adel was the child that was taken from her). After Adel came into her life, he became everything and everyone to her.



Figure 27 *Nargess*, The wedding night

When Adel is freed from prison and comes home, he finds the two women together and feels betrayed. He thinks Afagh told Nargess everything. He then tells Nargess the truth and kicks Afagh out of the house. Nargess tries to stop him, but she cannot. That night, Nargess locks the door, refusing to let him in the house. But the next morning she calls him. He looks very ashamed and sorry, and tells her he will divorce Afagh, although he thinks this will kill her. But Nargess look as him very strongly and says, “Afagh is not my issue, my problem is your job, you have to get a proper job” (Figure 28).

Despite Nargess’ efforts to find Adel a respectable job, he decides to take on one last big burglary. Afagh, also behind this, encourages him. They are successful and steal a lot of money, but the police capture their contact. Afagh and Adel decide to flee, but Adel sends Afagh first to get Nargess. When Nargess finds out about the money, she takes the bag from Afagh, locks her in the room, and runs to take the money to police. Adel arrives and finds that Nargess has just left, so he runs after her. He finds her by the road and they struggle. Nargess, unable to convince him to return the money to police, looks at him disappointed and throws the bag to the other side of the road and leaves. Right before this, Afagh, who has released herself, arrives at the other side of the road. Beautifully depicted, Adel is left between Nargess, who is leaving, and Afagh, who is standing by the bag of money. She takes the bag and asks him to go with her. Adel is torn between the two women, but finally decides to go after Nargess. Afagh then



Figure 28 *Nargess*, The truth is told to Nargess about Afagh and Adel's relationship

unconsciously starts walking after them and steps in front of a big truck and dies. Her scream makes the young couple turn. Nargess runs to her and Adel sits on the ground holding his head. He could not manage to save everything and everyone. Afagh becomes the victim of his greed (Figure 29).



Figure 29 *Nargess*, The final scene

The Thematic Similarities and Differences

(Non-)Professional Actors

The three directors, for the most part, use professional actors in their films. Only Derakhshandeh in her first film *Relationship* and her last film *Eternal Children* uses non-professional actors. A real mute boy, who in real life went through the same hardships to take control of his situation and learned to put his other senses to use in communicating with others, plays the character of Nasser in *Relationship*. In *Eternal Children*, Derakhshandeh uses a boy with Down syndrome; although it was a difficult process for the filming, she declared that she would never use a professional actor for the role, because the whole purpose of making the film was to say why society has forgotten kids like Ali.²⁶⁰

In the more melodramatic films of Derakhshandeh and Milani, the use of professional actors is quite evident, but in Bani-Etemad's films it is not as obvious. This is because Bani-Etemad not only employs realistic makeup and costumes, but she also pays a lot of attention in casting her characters. To her and the lead actress in *Gilaneh*,

²⁶⁰ Elaheh Khosravi, "Koudakane Mahkoom be Habse Abad. Cinema weekly." <http://www.derakhshandeh.ir/Gallery/NewsPaper/Main/011086-Etemad.jpg>. Accessed June 2008.

Fatemeh Mo'tamad-Aria's compliment, much of the audience, after watching *Gilaneh*, thought that the real mother, a non-professional actor, played her.²⁶¹

Women vs. Mothers

Haskell argues that a woman in patriarchal society "...is dependent for her well-being and 'fulfillment' on institutions — marriage, motherhood — that by translating the word 'woman' into 'wife' and 'mother' end[s] her independent identity."²⁶² This notion of motherhood having been translated into the screen identity of women in the traditional narrative cinema is also very much evident in Iranian cinema both before and after the revolution. In fact, as Lucy Fischer articulates, based on Haskell's argument, "Maternity is depicted on-screen as a strict cultural requirement."²⁶³ Iranian women's cinema by female directors has also given into this so-called "cultural requirement" and introduces significant mother figures in their films. But they usually break the clichés and depict mother figures that do not fit the stereotypical roles often portrayed in the traditional narrative films. Milani and Bani-Etemad usually challenge the role of the

²⁶¹ Joanne Laurier and David Walsh. "An interview with Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, co-director of *Gilaneh*." 3 October 2005. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/oct2005/bani-o03.shtml>. Accessed on June 2008.

²⁶² Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 150.

²⁶³ Lucy Fischer, *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre*. Princeton, (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 10.

mothers in their films and argue whether they can be “something else besides a mother.”²⁶⁴

Although the sacrificing-mother characters exist in Iranian films from both before and after the revolution, there has been a shift in the portrayal of the sacrificing mothers in the post-revolutionary films. The mother character in the pre-revolutionary films worked only in the margins of the narrative, confirming nothing but the stereotypes. “The device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of ‘the woman’s film’ in general and the sub-genre of the maternal melodrama in particular.”²⁶⁵ For example, the mother character in the film *Gheisar* is the ultimate sacrificial mother who dies from the sorrow of her children’s untimely deaths. The mother has no active role; she is merely there to dramatize the situation. But what is interesting is the figure of the surrogate mother introduced right at her funeral scene. This further confirms the elevated position of the mother figure in supporting the male protagonist. In the funeral scene, Azam, Gheisar’s fiancée, goes to offer her condolences to Gheisar (Figure 30), who was crying by his mother’s grave. In this moment of loss, while getting up, he turns and puts his head on Azam’s shoulder, as if he accepts her offer by replacing her as his surrogate mother. From the moment Azam is elevated to the position of the maternal figure we no longer see her face, she merely becomes the support pedestal for the

²⁶⁴ Linda Williams. “Something Else Besides a Mother: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama.” *Cinema Journal* 24.1 (1984): 2.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

protagonist. Another instance that confirms Azam's maternal position, her sacrificial position, is the fact that her presence protects Gheisar in this scene. It is while he is crying on her shoulder that he notices the police officers waiting to arrest him after the ceremony. He uses her as a shield to hide behind while signalling to his friends, who then create a commotion when he pretends to faint, actually running away.



Figure 30 *Gheisar*, The funeral scene

The mother character is quite different in the works of the female directors, but even if they never take the central position, they still play an active role. In

Derakhshandeh's films the role of the mother figure is usually quite significant. In *Relationship* it is the collaboration of the mother and the teacher that helps Nasser to come to terms with his disability.

In Derakhshandeh's second film, *The Little Bird of Happiness*, the absence of the mother and the presence of the mother figure is quite important. Malihe, the 10-year-old protagonist, has lost her ability to speak after witnessing the tragic death of her mother, who drowns in a swimming pool. Malihe has built an aggressive persona since the incident, and due to her inability to communicate freely she is constantly teased both by the neighbouring kids and by her classmates. When everyone, even her father, has lost hope in Malihe's recovery, the new teacher, Miss Shafiq, at the School for Special Kids, takes interest in Malihe's case. Miss Shafiq observes Malihe's hostile behaviour and tries to get closer to her. Winning her trust, she finally becomes her friend. Miss Shafiq, the literal translation of her name meaning "compassionate," tries to reconcile Malihe with her life and turn her bitter experience a little sweet by offering her some love and attention. When Miss Shafiq is accused of playing mother for Malihe, she is reprimanded because she has no authority, and also because it would cause Malihe grief if she ever failed to continue contact with her in the future. She responds with, "This makes no sense! Refusing her the love I can give her now is like denying water to someone who is dying of thirst because it may not be possible to give them more water later on." In a very powerful scene towards the end, Miss Shafiq finally proves to the rest of the teachers that Malihe is not mentally ill; but it is not until the final scene, when a fire starts in the building, that she manages to free Malihe entirely from the

traumatic memory of watching her mother die. She is once again able to speak, and the very first word she utters is “mother.”

The role of mother is also key in almost all of Bani-Etemad’s films, but the significance of her mother character is quite different in comparison to Derakhshandeh’s works. For example, the two mothers in Derakhshandeh’s *Eternal Children* (2007) and Bani-Etemad’s *Gilaneh* (2005) are both faced with having disabled children and are worried about what will come of their children once they are gone. Although there are some thematic parallels between the two films, the roles of the mothers are quite different in their placement within the plot structures. *Eternal Children* is about Ali, a boy who has Down syndrome. After his mother is gone his brother will be his guardian, and the brother has to make sure that his future wife will accept having Ali as part of their family. The film centers on Negar’s decision as to whether or not she should marry Iman, Ali’s brother. Negar, who is constantly being reminded of her family’s disapproval of this marriage, goes on to research the difficulties of living with someone with Down syndrome. In the process, she learns that it is possible for them to learn and behave. She even meets a group who are making their living by working. All this plus her love for Iman makes her go against everything and marry Iman. The film, although not centered on Ali’s mother, still provides a good account of the mother’s suffering and worrying for her son’s well-being in case of her absence, which is inevitable because it is only natural for children to outlive their parents. The accurate portrayals of maternal affections that Derakhshandeh offers in all her films shows a very strong sense of maternity in her, which is somewhat unfortunate

since she does not have children herself in real life. Bani-Etemad's *Gilaneh* is also about a mother, Gilaneh, who takes care of her war-injured, paralyzed son, Ismaeel. Gilaneh is worried for her son's future when she no longer can take care of him, and the only way she thinks this can be resolved is by another woman's sacrifice in marrying Ismaeel to look after him. Although similar in premise, they are quite different films: *Gilaneh*, unlike *Eternal Children*, is focused on the mother rather than the son. Gilaneh is a very tangible and believable character; she is not made with the use of cliché dialogue and acting, while Derakhshandeh's film is full of melodramatic acting and cliché dialogue, which makes the film predictable from the beginning. *Gilaneh*, although it has a simple plot, keeps the attention of the audience to the very last scene.

The mother character in Milani's films is yet again different from the mother characters in Derakhshandeh and Bani-Etemad's films. With both Milani and Bani-Etemad, the mother characters are seeking to be more than just a mother, as evidenced by the characters in *The May Lady* and *The Hidden Half* who say they want to also just be human beings with other hopes and aims besides being a mother. In *The May Lady*, Forough, the protagonist, admits, "Once as a single mother you re-marry they will take away your crown of motherhood," which illustrates the difficult position she is in. The difference is that in most of Bani-Etemad's films — except in *The May Lady*, in which she gains her independence and decides to re-marry while also keeping her position as mother — the maternal responsibility comes before the mother's personal desire; while in Milani's works the personal desire is on par with the maternal responsibility, if not being more important. Milani's protagonists actively seek their desire to be

independent, or to at least be more than a mother. This is evident in all her films. In her first film, *Children of Divorce*, the mother who seeks an independent life has asked for a divorce. But due to the patriarchal society she lives in, she cannot see her children anymore, so ultimately she has to sacrifice her independence for the better of her children and returns home.

However, not all the maternal characters depicted by female directors are good and positive mothers. Bani-Etemad, quite controversially, has depicted faulty mother figures in two of her films, *Nargess* and *The Blue Veiled*. In *Nargess*, Afagh, is the tainted mother figure. Afagh has acted as both mother and wife for Adel since their first induction, he being only a teenager when they first met, then she poses as Adel's mother when he wants to marry Nargess. What is interesting is that, no matter what, the character of mother is analogous with the notion of sacrifice. Afagh sacrifices her love for Adel by acting as his mother at his wedding with Nargess. The other mother figure out of keeping with the sacrificial and loving mother is the one in *The Blue Veiled*: she is a drug addict. Not only does she not sacrifice herself for her children's well-being, but she uses her son for getting her drugs, which results in him getting thrown in jail for drug dealing.

Who is Behind the Camera?

The narrative structure of Derakhshandeh's films are not female-centered the way the films of Bani-Etemad and Milani are. Derakhshandeh addresses social issues that affect both men and women in society, similar to Bani-Etemad, but with the difference that Bani-Etemad usually has a female protagonist that leads the narrative, while Derakhshandeh has a male protagonist. Kuhn claims, "One of the generic features of the woman's picture as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view."²⁶⁶ But as it was argued earlier, Derakhshandeh does not employ a feminine voice in her filmmaking, while Bani-Etemad and Milani do. That is why it is perhaps more clear that the creative force behind a film is a woman when watching one of the films by Bani-Etemad or Milani, than when watching one of Derakhshandeh's films.

For example, in Derakhshandeh's first feature film *Relationship* (1986), which registered her name as the first female director in Iran, the protagonist is a boy. *Relationship* is the account of the struggles of Nasser, a 15-year-old mute boy who must come to terms with his disability, which has kept him emotionally apart from his family and friends, as he is unable to communicate through words. His teacher and mother help to restore his hope for life and the future, and he finally succeeds in breaking free from

²⁶⁶Annette Kuhn, "Women's genres," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 146.

his seclusion through realizing his capabilities, along with his family's awakening and their better responding to his needs.

Derakhshandeh not only has male protagonists in many of her films, but she also narrates the story through a male character in some of her films, such as *Passing Through the Dust* (1988), where she portrays the economic hardships experienced by a middle-class family. The story is narrated through the point of view of a hard-working teacher who has just bought a small house in the suburbs of Tehran. But everything he has worked so hard for and wished to achieve suddenly falls apart when his wife is in need of a kidney transplant or she may die. When his wife is on the verge of death and all his attempts to get a kidney have failed due to their financial problems, the mother of one of his students secretly donates one of her kidneys.

This is also true of the first three films by Bani-Etemad, *Off-Limits*, *The Canary Yellow*, and *Foreign Currency*. In these films the view of the female director is not quite evident; arguably, the director could be either a man or a woman because the narratives are quite male centered. However, this changes from her next film, *Nargess*, onwards, all of which she both wrote and directed.

When watching one of Milani's films, it is clear, like with Bani-Etemad's films, that the creative force behind them is a woman. They both use a feminine voice in presenting their ideas. Both Milani and Bani-Etemad work similarly by pinpointing uncommonly addressed issues and taboos difficult to discuss within Iranian society, and

both write scripts relating these issues to a female character. For example, in Iran it has been impossible to publicly discuss individual affiliation with certain (leftist) political parties, which fell out of grace with the government during the early years of the revolution. Nonetheless, Milani's film *The Hidden Half* exposes this taboo. "On one level the film is a personal melodrama of violence and love, but on another it portrays a climactic political period in contemporary Iranian history."²⁶⁷ As a consequence of making this film, the Islamic Revolutionary Court accused Milani of "supporting those waging war against God" and "misusing the arts in support of counterrevolutionary and armed opposition groups,"²⁶⁸ and she was sent to jail for a couple of weeks until president Khatami intervened and she was released. Although the two directors may be addressing similar uneasy subjects, their approach and style is different. Bani-Etemad only focuses on the problems and usually does not offer solutions — her films mostly leave the audience to decide how the story should end, she never gives a concrete answer — while Milani's films, on the other hand, often prescribe a particular solution to the issues she addresses, which is usually conceivable only if the female character is able to reach a degree of freedom or agency. In almost all of her films she promotes women's agency in their struggle against oppression, and conveys a message that freedom can only be obtained if women fight for it themselves.

²⁶⁷ Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, 263.

²⁶⁸ Stephanie Scott, "Tahmineh Milani Talks Back: A feminist filmmaker forges ahead and fights for freedom in Iran." December 2001.

<http://www.newenglandfilm.com/news/archives/01december/milani.htm>. Accessed on 19 June 2008.

Milani's work follows what Molly Haskell argues about the victimization of women. In her films "all women begin as victims,"²⁶⁹ but as the narrative unfolds, "they cease to be victims, cease to be easy identification figures, as they become increasingly complex and cruel, as they take fate into their own hands."²⁷⁰ Looking at Milani's films, her female characters have gradually gained more courage from her early films to her later films, and they have increasingly raised their voices louder. In her first film, *Children of Divorce*, the woman voices her problem by leaving her husband and asking for a divorce, but her freedom is temporary because she is defeated at the end, going back for the better of her children. In her next film, *The Legend of Ah*, Milani allows her protagonist to fantastically enter into other possible lives, although the experience of this shows that repression is everywhere. Still, through this fantasy the protagonist is allowed to be an active participant in setting the course of her own life. In her next three films, Milani uses the same actress, Niki Karimi, and gives the same screen name, Fereshteh, to her protagonists, perhaps implying they are all one character in different scenarios. In *Two Women*, while Fereshteh lives in silent resistance to her oppressive marriage, she prepares herself to be free from her husband's yoke, but unfortunately her freedom is only realized when her husband is killed by a mad stalker who has been released from jail. This notion of resistance, which is never voiced explicitly by Fereshteh in *Two Women*, is voiced through a letter written by Fereshteh to her husband in *The Hidden Half*. Milani then goes on and gives more courage to her protagonist in *The Fifth Reaction*. In this scenario, Fereshteh not only voices her opposition against

²⁶⁹ Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 161.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

her father-in-law's decision, but she also takes her children and runs away. From this film onwards Milani's protagonists take their destiny into their own hands. In her final film, *Tasfieh Hesab* (*Payback*, 2008), a group of women who were one way or another unjustly hurt by different men decide to take the law into their own hands and take back the right that was stolen from them.

Looking at *The Hidden Half*, the ascent and victory of the main female character is evident through the cinematic language and positioning of the camera Milani has chosen within the first scene of the film, during the credits. This scene very subtly summarizes the whole premise of the film. The film starts with two shots of Fereshteh and Dr. Javid's final encounter after their coincidental meeting almost twenty years after their initial separation, which is played in its entirety as a scene later on in the film. The scene starts with a medium close-up of her back towards the camera, with the camera pointing slightly upwards, putting her in the power position. She turns to face towards the camera (Figure 31) and gazes deeply to a point out of the frame. The shot cuts to a wide shot from behind her revealing the object of her gaze, Dr. Javid, who, with his back towards the camera, is walking away (Figure 32). Then the camera slowly starts elevating, shifting her out of the frame but keeping Dr. Javid in the shot (Figure 33). The moment of her leaving the frame is transitioned with the cluster of tree branches and leaves, which for a moment obscure the view of the camera, and only Dr. Javid is left in the frame. The shot is turned into her point of view of Dr. Javid walking away, but from above looking down.



Figure 31 *The Hidden Half*, Opening shot of the film



Figure 32 *The Hidden Half*, A shot from the same scene but later in the film



Figure 33 *The Hidden Half*, The beginning of the crane shot



Figure 34 *The Hidden Half*, The end point of the crane shot

Because of her turning towards the camera in the first shot, Milani creates an anticipation in the viewer of Fereshteh to run after him or call his name in the next wide shot, but not only does she not run after him, she stays put with no movement at all, causing her elevation, which perhaps implies her freedom or power over her decision to

let him go. This scene in its chronological position within the narrative has a completely different meaning, and the camera angles have also been selected differently. In the same action of Fereshteh turning towards the camera to look at Dr. Javid, the camera is positioned at her eye level and does not depict her in the power position (Figure 34). The expression on her face at this point in the film is defined as a mixture of sadness and regret for not having given Dr. Javid the chance to defend himself from the accusations against him. The viewer has no doubt that she will not call after him, knowing that she has moved on and has a different life.

In *The Hidden Half*, Fereshteh starts off as stereotypical character of a wife and a mother, but then as the narrative unfolds she also situates herself into a deeper character, on par with a woman on the verge of punishment. Milani establishes all that is to come within the first scene of the film. The first scene after the credits is a shot of a mirror that almost fills the whole frame (Figure 35). In the reflection of the mirror, one of the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo is shown on the opposite wall, right in the center of the frame. Fereshteh enters the frame and sits in front of the mirror, completely covering Frida's picture and replacing it with her direct gaze into the lens, staring at her reflection. This image is accompanied by the voiceover of an answering-machine message left by her son, asking her to pick him up from school later than the usual time. Within the first couple of words spoken in the film, her social position as the mother is established. Fereshteh's impression in the way she looks up and down at herself, speaks of her disapproval or even disgust with herself as having become nothing more than the reflection — as a mother and a wife — that everyone else sees. Using one of Frida's

self-portraits symbolically conveys the director's political views. As Liza Bakewell states,

For young artists today, Frida's work represents a personalistic identity, a pictorial self that stands in contrast to the mainstream. In the 1930s and 1940s she constructed her messages on the margins of the Mexican mainstream and set in motion a discourse that has become a model for the expression of contemporary identity for feminists, gays, Chicanas, and numerous other individuals seeking to gain subject status through self-generated representations of self.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Liza Bakewell, "Illustrations To 'Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading.'" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13.3 (1993): 182.



Figure 35 *Hidden Half*, first scene

However, the level of impact of this shot can be argued, since perhaps a limited number of people are familiar with Frida Kahlo's work. But even in the case that the viewers do not know Frida, this shot still convey a deeper meaning because of the way Milani has juxtaposed the protagonist's veiled head with the unveiled woman's picture in the background. Seconds later in that shot the phone rings; upon her lifting the receiver and starting to talk the camera pans onto her face talking on the phone. This implies that the film is not going to represent her through her reflected image, but will rather represent her real self.

Bani-Etemad's method of storytelling is different from Milani's in that Bani-Etemad usually allows the audience to decide how the film ends. In *The Blue Veiled* she shows that both Nobar and Rasul are victims of their situations and social standings. It is the class difference more than the age difference that makes it difficult for them to realize their love for one another. Rasul's daughters object to a marriage between them, not just because Nobar is too young, but also because they are afraid that she is after their father's wealth. They cannot see or feel Rasul and Nobar's love for one another. At the end of the film, Nobar, who has been hurt emotionally by Rasul's daughter trying to bribe her to leave her father, has packed and wants to leave after saying goodbye to Rasul. The film ends with Nobar standing by the train tracks, presumably waiting for Rasul to come. Although Rasul's car is seen approaching the tracks, the last shot is of the moving train dividing the plain they are standing on. This can be read as showing that they will always be in two different worlds and will never see happiness, or that

they will eventually see happiness a few seconds after the shot is cut, when the train no longer creates a wall between them.

There are certain topics that are depicted similarly by Derakhshandeh and Bani-Etemad, but their approach is quite different. Derakhshandeh and Bani-Etemad, in *The Wet Dream* (2006) and *The May Lady* (1998), respectively, each deal with the issue of a single mother wanting to remarry. *The Wet Dream* is a film very much in tune with the problems that Iranian youths in Iran face regarding friendships among girls and boys. Arash, a 16-year-old boy, is a typical trouble-making high school student who lives with his single mother. One night he runs away from home because he can't come to terms with the fact that his mother may be looking into establishing a new family with another man. After his parents find him, he agrees to go and live with his father for some time. The father tries to speak with him and make him understand that it is his mother's right to remarry. But this problem fades into the background when Arash meets a girl next door to his father's house and falls in love. This forbidden young love then leads to a series of problems for both families. In *The May Lady*, Forough Kia, a successful filmmaker and single mother, is in love with a respectable man who completely understands her, but she faces her teenage son's opposition to her desire to marry and start a new life with her lover. Although the pain is centered upon the protagonist, Forough Kia, both her son Mani and Dr. Rahbar, the man she loves, are equally distressed, as her decision either way will also affect their lives. Unlike *The May Lady*, *The Wet Dream* is not focused on the mother and her issue of remarrying, but Derakhshandeh points to that problem in the background of the youths' relationship

problems. What is interesting is how controversial these two films look today. When *The May Lady* came out in 1998, it was a very controversial film that raised issues about the taboo love of a single mother, but, surprisingly, it did get screening permit.²⁷² Eight years later, in 2005, Derakhshandeh made *The Wet Dream*, which, if looked at in the same light as *The May Lady*, is even more controversial because it raises issues about illegitimate teenage relationships in Iran. But not only did it not attract any criticism for being controversial, it was given the Golden Statue and the cash prize for the best Family and Educational Movie of the year at the 36th Roshd International Film Festival in Tehran in 2006. Iranian cinema owes this change, although it may seem small, to the hard work of directors such as Bani-Etemad and Milani, who did not give up on making films about social dilemmas in Iranian society, even if it took them much longer before they gained shooting and screening permits.

Another topic that both Derakhshandeh and Bani-Etemad have addressed is addiction. Derakhshandeh's *Candle in the Wind* (2003) and Bani-Etemad's *The Mainline* (2006) are each about young addicts in Iran. The major difference is that Derakhshandeh's protagonist is a young man, Farzin, while Bani-Etemad's protagonist is a girl, Sara. Sara and Farzin are both from divorced families, but in Farzin's situation he cannot count on the support of his family, while Sara's family, although separated, is still by her side trying to help her. There are references to going abroad to Canada in

²⁷² Azadeh Farahmand, "Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema." In *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*. ed. Richard Tapper (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 102.

both films: in *Candle in the Wind*, Farzin's mother marries and goes to Canada, while Sara's fiancé is waiting for her in *The Mainline* to take her there after they get married. Derakhshandeh deals with the drug problem as an alienating issue afflicting a young man who has lost hope and is denied his family's love, while Bani-Etemad looks at the drug problem from a different standpoint. Bani-Etemad does not look at this problem as an alienating problem,²⁷³ but depicts it as a problem that can even affect young girls who do have their family's support around them. However, in *The Mainline*, the separated parents blame each other for their daughter's becoming an addict. In one scene, the mother admits that if she had stayed with her husband this may have not happened, but the film hints at other explanations and maintains a view of the bigger picture, showing that besides family problems there are external motives that could have contributed to this situation, such as the fact that drugs are so readily accessible to young people. The film does not view people involved with drugs as apart from society as a whole, as *Candle in the Wind* does; it instead tries to suggest that the problem may arise anywhere and that anyone can be afflicted by it. *Candle in the Wind* works more like a warning signal for people; Derakhshandeh depicts how terrible one's life becomes when involved with drugs, and has a more positive tone, suggesting that there is always a way back, as Farzin starts anew. *The Mainline* is darker; although Sara and her mother

²⁷³ Bani-Etemad, in the process of her research while making her documentary *Under the Skin of the City* about addiction, called random numbers from the telephone book asking people about their knowledge of the amount of addiction in Tehran. To her surprise, the majority of people denied their awareness of the problem of addiction in Tehran, which is not low. She explained this as being because people are used to hiding their problems and never admitting to it publicly, and also that one of the unofficial treatments of dealing with addicts has been to segregate them from the rest of society, alienating them or at least pretending to alienate them. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, *Lecture during the Bani-Etemad Workshop*, SOAS, London, April 2008.

are on their way to a house outside the city for her to quit her addiction, the film never really shows whether they reach their destination or not.

Representation of Men vs. Women

As has been mentioned, unlike the films of Derakhshandeh, the works of Bani-Etemad and Milani are usually centered on a female character. Given this focus on women in their films, the question of the appropriateness of the use of the term “feminism” in describing their approach has often been raised by critics and scholars. In this section I will not address the topic of feminism in their works, as in doing so one needs to first define the notion of feminism within an Iranian context. Instead, this section will look closely at the works of these directors to assess the change in the image of men in their films, when, as it has been said, they have changed the represented image of women in their films.

As has already been discussed, up to the 1990s the representation of Iranian women in most films suffered from stereotypes and one-dimensionality. In one way or another, women were nearly always portrayed in an idealized form. In films after the revolution, women were still kept in the margins, and were mostly portrayed as angelic creatures, as sacred mothers and wives, and, as Shahla Lahiji puts it, women were only turned from “unchaste” to “chaste dolls.”²⁷⁴ One can argue that this prefabricated image

²⁷⁴ Shahla Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.” In *New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002) 215-226.

of women was one of the reasons behind the years of one-dimensional portrayals of women in Iranian cinema, and/or the reason for the lack of female protagonists. It was much easier for filmmakers to tell their stories through male protagonists, since men, unlike women, could be portrayed in any way that the story demanded. But after the 1990s, women were portrayed more realistically, and tangible woman characters entered Iranian cinema, coinciding with some of the more successful works by the female filmmakers of the time.

Looking at Bani-Etemad's films, although the protagonists are usually women, her films are not one-sided portrayals of the world. She does not take revenge for the decades of faceless women in Iranian cinema by de-personifying her male characters; instead, she addresses issues that can concern anyone. As it has been stated by Bani-Etemad on various occasions, she does not want to be identified as a female filmmaker or a feminist filmmaker, but as a filmmaker who happens to be a woman.²⁷⁵ She does not limit herself to her vision of the world as a woman; she goes past personal experience. As Katayoun Biglari says, Bani-Etemad's films don't belong to one sector of society, but they belong to all.²⁷⁶ Her films depict the different classes and situations of society, and, although most of her films revolve around a female protagonist, they are not gender specific. She makes films about "people" and their problems, regardless of their gender. Bani-Etemad achieves gender balance in her work by creating a cinematic

²⁷⁵ Naficy, Hamid, "Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema: The Evolution of Rakhshan Banietamad's Films." In *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Murray Pomerance. The Suny Series, Cultural Studies in Cinema/Video (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 47.

²⁷⁶ Katayoon Biglari, "Tadavom-e Saye-ye Mard." in *Banu-yi Urdibihisht: Naqd Va Barrasi-i Filmha-yi Rakhshan Bani-itmad*. ed. Zavin Qukasiyan (Tihiran: Nashr-i Yushij : Nashr-i Salis, 1378)

world where notions of villainy, heroism, and morality are not absolute, but rather exist in the context of Iranian culture and society.

Tahmineh Milani's films, although dealing with similar problems and issues to Bani-Etemad's films, do not approach the subjects in the same manner. Especially when dealing with the issues of patriarchy in Iranian society, Milani's films are often more critical and usually find only the male sector of society responsible for shortcomings in women's lives, while Bani-Etemad depicts patriarchy as a social phenomenon rather than a purely individual-imposed act. Iran is still in transition from tradition to modernism, but this transition is not easy; it requires adaptability and breaking away from what is deeply rooted in the culture.²⁷⁷ Breaking away from patriarchy, which is embedded well into the public's discourse and everyday life, is the result of this transition towards modernism. Bani-Etemad and Milani depict this modern evolution, this breaking from the constraints of tradition, in most of their films, with a special focus on women in Iranian society. But where they point their blame is different: Bani-Etemad, unlike Milani, does not blame patriarchy only on the male sector of society; she suggests that there is a need for a collective effort of the whole of society for it to change. Mehrnaz Saeid-Vafa also, regarding Bani-Etemad's films, states, "The evil is in society, not in characters."²⁷⁸ This is particularly evident in *Nargess* (1991). In this film, Adel is in a way imprisoned by Afagh's need for him to be her man, as the only way she

²⁷⁷ Najmabadi, "(Un)Veiling Feminism." 34-35.

²⁷⁸ Mehrnaz Saeid-Vafa, "Location (Physical Space) and Cultural Identity in Iranian Films." In *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*. ed. Richard Tapper. (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 205

can regain or keep her honour and dignity is through her association with a man.

Although it is Afagh who was first forced to choose this path because of society's denial and rejecting a young, divorced, single woman as an individual member of society unless she has a man protecting her, this need led to Adel's entrapment. Bani-Etemad is portraying the notion of patriarchy as affecting both the men and women in society. In Milani's films, usually the women are the only victims of patriarchy; this is evident from her very first film *Children of Divorce*, wherein it is the mother who finally has to forget her freedom for the better of her children, shown through her submission and accepting the key from her ex-husband to return to her duty as wife and mother.

However, there is one exception in her films: *The Fifth Reaction* (2003). This film is about Fereshteh, a young teacher with two children who has just lost her husband and is worried that her father-in-law will take her children away, as is his legal right. He comes to her with a proposal: she can either let the kids grow up with him in his house, where she is no longer welcome to live because he has two other unmarried sons, or she can marry the second son of the family, Majid, in order to be able to stay in his house, and she would once again have a man protecting and supporting her. In this film, Milani introduces the patriarchal beliefs as higher than the official law. Fereshteh reiterates this a couple of times during the film, saying, "You don't know my father-in-law, Hadj Safdar, he makes his own rules." What is interesting in this film is that, for the first time, Milani introduces a male victim, Majid, the brother-in-law who has been offered to marry his older brother's widow. Although his character is not developed that much, it can be understood that he is obeying his father out of an inescapable respect that is

part of the patriarchal system. But again, this film is not any different from Milani's other films in that she only portrays women capable of breaking away from clichés and traditions. In this film, Majid does nothing against the patriarchal imposed rules, he only subtly shows his disagreement with his father with a faint smile — which speaks from his heart — when they keep missing Fereshteh, who has escaped with her children to the southern region of Iran.

Bani-Etemad neither pictures all men as villains nor portrays all women as heroes. There are no villains in Bani-Etemad's films; no one is pure good or evil, they are all human and capable of doing good in one moment and doing bad in the next, given the situation. For example, in *Nargess*, Adel could not resist the one last heist and the quick money, despite Nargess' plea; but in the final scene he turns his back on both the cash and Afagh and follows Nargess, which in a sense shows his desire to stay clean (Figure 29). Contrarily, Abbas, the trustworthy and good-natured son in *Under the Skin of the City*, in an act of desperation after losing the money he got from selling their house, turns to drug smuggling to make up for his loss.

It can also be argued that Bani-Etemad's films have no antagonists, because usually it is not just one person who is responsible for the consequences, but it is a collective duty, directed at society as a whole. Although it may seem that there is a struggle between the individual characters in the films, as Naghmeh Samini states, it is

really a struggle between the people and the system in which they live.²⁷⁹ Either everyone is to be blamed or no one; in a way, everyone portrayed is a victim — even the victimizers themselves. The men and women in Bani-Etemad's films are all given similar social status, they are all suffering equally and are all affected by the problems; the difference is in the way they react in dealing with these problems. Although in all her films the protagonist is suffering one way or another, and even though the catalyst of the pain may be a person, Bani-Etemad never blames that one person, but questions a larger system and the established traditions that are preventing people, both men and women, from full growth in society. It may at first seem as though the focus is only on the women and their suffering, but her lens is directed at the reality of society, and therefore does not overlook the men in the frame. For example, in *Nargess*, if Afagh and Nargess are suffering from their circumstances, so is Adel. The film starts with Adel's point of view, and it is through his perspective that Afagh is introduced. It is easy at first to think of Afagh as the antagonist: she is the treacherous older woman who has deceived Adel, and she is also the one responsible for him being a thief. From the beginning there is no question of Adel being victimized, but Afagh's position is shifted before the audience. Later in the film it becomes clear that Afagh's character is not the sole antagonist either; she crosses over to the opposite side and become a victim as well, after her character is further developed and when she tells her life story to Nargess. Bani-Etemad, in the scene where Adel tells Nargess that Afagh is not his mother but his wife, challenges Afagh's position from Nargess' point view, and when Nargess declares

²⁷⁹ Naghmeh Samini, "Bar U Bebakshayeed..." in *Banu-yi Urdibihisht: Naqd Va Barrasi-i Filmha-yi Rakhshan Bani-itimad*. ed. Zavin Qukasiyan (Tihiran: Nashr-i Yushij : Nashr-i Salis, 1378), 64.

that it is Adel being a thief that she cannot stand, not the presence of Afagh, she confirms Afagh's position as also a victim in this scenario. Nargess, who with all her power wants to save her marriage, has mercy on Afagh because she sees her as the victim of her circumstances, and also maybe because she sees her own future in Afagh if she loses Adel. On the other hand, if one feels more sympathetic toward Afagh from the beginning of the film, then one may find Adel to be the antagonist, especially when he falls in love with the young Nargess and when the fear of his abandoning Afagh arises; but he is not to be blamed either, because he also has the right to be looking for the "normal" life that has until then been refused him. In a sense, the three of them are victims of their circumstances, a theme that carries on into Bani-Etemad's later films as well.

The place of victim and victimizer is a lot clearer in Milani's films. For example, in *Two Women*, the story of an oppressed young woman, Fereshteh, is in an ultimately patriarchal society. In this film almost all the men are vilified. There are four male characters in the film: the first three men — her father, her crazy stalker, and her husband — are the ones who in different stages of her life have one way or another imprisoned her and decided her future for her. The stalker, who ends up in jail, has more effect on Fereshteh's life than she does herself; it is because of him that she is forced to marry her future husband, because her traditional family believed that, because she went to court to complain against the stalker, she had lost her dignity, and they feared no other suitor would ever come for her. Through this film Milani also emphasizes that a woman gains social status through her connection with a man, very much like the

situation of Afagh and Adel in *Nargess*. The fourth and last male character in the film, which is presumably the example of a good husband and a good man in the film, is the husband of Fereshteh's best friend from her university times in Tehran. What is curious about this character is his development in the structure of the story. He can be easily omitted with no one missing him; he plays no active role — in a sense his character can be seen to resemble the marginal, good woman characters in the earlier Iranian films. It is as if Milani is responding to the years of faceless women in Iranian cinema by creating faceless male characters in her films.

While the representations of villainy, heroism, and morality are ambivalent in both Bani-Etemad and Milani's films, neither of them leaves much space for negotiation in certain areas. For example, Bani-Etemad does not leave much room to discuss the impact of patriarchy in Iranian society, or poverty's role in blurring morality for the people concerned, and holds all members of society equally responsible for social injustices; while Milani portrays society as leaning more towards one side and leaves no room for further possibilities of women sharing some of the responsibility for how everything works in society. But they are both aware of all the social problems, and their films are direct reflections of these problems in society. The difference is in their method of portrayal: Bani-Etemad's films are driven by a documentary film style and her stories are told through a simple plot, while Milani dramatizes the stories and tells them in a more exaggerated form. Differences lie in their techniques of storytelling as well: Bani-Etemad treats her characters, both male and female, equally, but Milani

focuses much more on the female characters, even though it may result in a stereotypical depiction of the male characters.

Conclusion

The female representation in Iranian cinema has changed since the early 1990s due to the persistent works of filmmakers such as Bani-Etemad, Milani, and Derakhshandeh in Iran. One of the main reasons for this, as it was discussed earlier, can be seen as the direct result of the increase in the number of female directors in the Iranian film industry. This change is parallel with the shift that Talattof has noted in the literary discourse after the revolution. In the post-revolutionary period, “[i]n their works, women have made their voices explicit; women, who have to wear veils in public, unveil themselves in their books. [...] They began to explore gender issues ranging from women’s history to sexuality.”²⁸⁰

While the brief look at the body of works by the first female directors demonstrates their crucial role in shifting the representation of women in Iranian cinema, their legacy would not have prevailed if the other filmmakers had not also followed in their footsteps. The next two chapters will look at specific examples of

²⁸⁰ Talattof, “Iranian Women’s Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism.” 553.

works made alongside the films discussed in this chapter that will further portray this holistic evolution within Iranian cinema.

Chapter 5: Contingent Presences: Little Strangers in the Land of Patriarchy

Introduction

This chapter looks at three films by three prominent directors, Bahram Beizai, Dariush Mehrjui and Ebrahim Hatamikia. Bahram Beizai and Dariush Mehrjui, both mentioned in the previous chapters, started their careers in cinema in the years before the revolution, but Ebrahim Hatamikia started his career in 1986 with his first film *Hoviat (Identity)*.

The reasons for selecting the three films discussed in this chapter — Bahram Beizai's *Bashu Gharibeye Kuchak (Bashu, the Little Stranger, 1985/86)*,²⁸¹ Dariush

²⁸¹ *Bashu, The Little Stranger* by Bahram Baizai, is shot in 1985/6, but it was held from screen until 1988. After relaxations of censorship rules it gained screening license and was released nationally, in full in 1990. Rahimieh, "Marking gender and difference in the myth of a nation: Bashu: a post-revolutionary Iranian film," 238.

Mehrjui's *Sara* (1993) and Ebrahim Hatamikia's *Booy-e Pirahan-e Yusef* (*The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, 1995) — are threefold. First, as explained earlier, the directors are among the most prominent in Iranian cinema. Second, all three films are female-centric (as are all the films studied in this thesis). Third, and most importantly, is the thematic similarity between these three films. They create the third of the four stages in the shift towards women's self realization as discussed in the introductory chapter.

To recap, the first stage was the unrealistic and dichotomized portrayal of *chaste* and *unchaste* female characters in the films before the revolution and, with only minimal change, in the majority of films made in the first decade after the revolution. The second stage, which I argued was the point of departure for a more nuanced representation of female subjects, was the entrance of female directors in the feature-filmmaking arena. Chapter 4 treated the films from the first generation of female filmmakers and identified Bani-Etemad's *Nargess* (1991) as the critical film that signified the start of this shift in Iranian cinema. The films in Chapter 4 depict the various struggles of women in a patriarchal society.

This chapter covers stage three, about the authority and independence that is bestowed on women due to hardship in the absence of the men. The thematic similarity between these three films is the conditional presence that these women characters have gained in their filmic portraits. Their presence is conditional upon the absence of the men; the women are to give up their position once the men are back. Although the films are stylistically very different, the female protagonists in all three are in charge of the

well-being of their family in one way or another. In *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, Na'i, the female protagonist, is forced to take care of her land, home, and two young children single-handedly because her husband has gone to war. As Rahimieh writes about the film, Na'i is a symbolic representation of the nation and homeland.²⁸² In *Sara*, the protagonist has gone into massive debt to pay for her husband's medical expenses abroad without letting him know. And finally, in *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, Shirin, the protagonist, has come back to Iran to have the home ready for her brother's return from captivity as a prisoner of war. All three women have been trying to keep their homes safe and ready for when their men come home. In the first instance, these women may also seem like the clichéd good women defined in Chapter 3, who are awaiting the return of their men in patience and passivity. However, what differentiates them is that these women drive the narratives. These films are their stories; they have weak moments and strong moments, and they are not one-dimensional characters. What is interesting is the fact that they have agency, and the main question that is raised in these films is perhaps, "What will happen to these women after the men are back?"

In fact, Sara responds to this very question in the final scene of Mehrjui's film. She addresses her husband, before she leaves him: "You never took me seriously, now after all this you want me to turn back to the same little spoiled lady whom you had to watch over not to do anything wrong [...] but I can't anymore, I have to go and learn more about myself." What this chapter looks at is the independence that women acquire

²⁸² Ibid.

through the various conditions they were in. Their roles are therefore defined both by their voluntary desire to take charge of the situation and by the forces of nature or of the society that put them in that situation to begin with.

Bashu, the Little Stranger

Bahram Baizai, born to a literary family in Tehran in 1937, is one of the most influential figures in contemporary Iranian culture. He is a scholar as well as a writer and director of both films and plays. Despite his pioneering role in cinema, he has faced much resistance from the government in the form of a lack of production support, delayed screenings, and even total censorship of his scripts or finished films. Therefore, in spite of his lengthy career in cinema, he has only directed fourteen films; but among these are some of the most wonderful films in Iranian film history. Analyzing two of his films in this study perhaps demonstrates his influence on the history of Iranian cinema.

Bahram Beizai's *Bashu Gharibeye Kuchak (Bashu, the Little Stranger)* is one of the most talked-about films in Iranian cinema from the last thirty years. It is a story of a young boy who has lost his family and home to the Iran-Iraq war. The boy, from a town in the southwest of Iran, runs off and mistakenly is taken to the northern part of the country, where he is a total stranger. His voyage in the truck from the south to the north portrays, in a very short amount of time, the large difference in environment between

the south and north of the country. This introductory scene is accompanied by the different languages that people speak from the south to the north. One of the most important aspects of this film is the message of nationalism, which is achieved by showing the obvious differences among the people and their native habitat, and pointing out the unifying elements. Despite the fact that it only contains one scene with actual shots of conflict, this film is relatively anti-war and carries an important message of peace. This message, along with the film's freedom in representation of the female subject, may be why it did not get a general release until after the Iran-Iraq war had ended (Figure 36).

Bashu ends up somewhere in the north of the country near the Caspian Sea, but he does not know where he is or whether he is still in Iran or not. He does not speak their dialect, nor does he look like them — he does not even recognize their food. A woman, Na'i, the protagonist, who is a mother of two awaiting the return of her



Figure 36 *Bashu*, The opening scene of the film

husband, takes him under her wing. Na'i, who lives in a beautiful secluded village in the green and lush northern part of Iran, has rice paddies that she looks after day and night to make sure her crops are not attacked by birds or wild hogs. Najmeh Khalili Mahani asserts that Bezai's rendition "looks into an ancient heritage that is symbolized by the

female in order to attract the attention to what he believes is lost, the female agency and the role of the female in continuation of life, home, and therefore society.”²⁸³



Figure 37 *Bashu*, Na'i and Bashu's first encounter

After arriving in the north, Bashu appears at Na'i's rice paddy, lost. Na'i's children find him and take her to where he is hiding, but when Na'i shows up he runs away. He comes back and watches them from a distance. Na'i, who realizes he is lost,

²⁸³ Najmeh Khalili Mahani, "Bahram Baizai, Iranian Cinema, feminism, art cinema." January 31, 2003 http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/baizai.html.

wants to help him and offers him a piece of bread, but he runs away again. In the evening, when Na'i is leaving the field, she leaves some bread for him on a pole and he eats it after they leave (Figure 37). She starts leaving food in different places near where Bashu is hiding, and even leaves the barn door open at night for him to sleep in.

Baizai, in several ways, conveys that the boy's appearance and dark skin seem unnatural to the people in the north. One mode he accomplishes this through is dialogue: in describing the boy to the village grocer, Na'i says that it is as if he has escaped a coalmine and asks for an extra bar of soap to wash him, thinking that after a good wash he would no longer look different. A second and more visual method employed for portraying the difference is through people's stares when they first see him. In a scene the morning after his arrival, when he has slept in Na'i's barn, Na'i's little daughter is depicted sitting near him with a mirror in her hand comparing their different skin tones (Figure 38). This scene is also very significant because it is the beginning of Na'i and Bashu's relationship. The way that Na'i leads him to her house so that he will have a safe place to sleep is quite interesting: it is almost as if she tames him and teaches him what to do by leaving him food on certain places, the way that one can tame a stray cat to stay and not leave the house. It is also in this scene that he is depicted as being unfamiliar with the food in the north. Na'i leave a bowl of boiled rice (the signature food of the north, straight off their own lands) out for Bashu in the evening. He runs and takes a handful conveying his hunger, but then he makes a face



Figure 38 *Bashu*, He is welcomed at Na'i's home

out of dislike, leaves the bowl on the ground, and curls up by the tree.²⁸⁴ Finally, after a few seconds, he changes his mind, comes back, picks up the bowl, and eats all of the food it holds.

As Rahimieh asserts, “If Bashu succeeds in negotiating a place in his new community, it is primarily through Na’i’s agency.”²⁸⁵ Na’i, the iconic symbol of the mother, is the one who connects with Bashu and brings peace to the boy who has lost his house and family to the war. She is the one who brings back order to everyone’s life. Beizai also depicts this by showing that, as the narrative progresses, Bashu becomes closer to Na’i and sees a reflection of his real mother in Na’i (Figure 39). One of the most interesting elements of this film is that it portrays some of the different cultures, customs, dialects, and climates of Iran. Bashu’s mother in his daydreams is depicted in traditional southern clothing, which is quite different from Na’i’s clothing. However, the juxtaposition of the two mothers in one scene conveys they are the same. In the scene at the bazaar, Bashu goes missing. A worried Na’i, who is looking for him, enters a shot in which we can see his mother standing in the centre. After entering the shot, Na’i goes behind Bashu’s mother, suggesting that they become one (Figure 40).

²⁸⁴ There is a huge difference between the cuisine of north and south of Iran. The foods in the south are usually quite spicy and full of different herbs and spices, while the food in the north, especially rice, is much simpler. As a local would say, “you can taste good rice without cluttering your palette with too many spices.”

²⁸⁵ Rahimieh, “Marking gender and difference in the myth of a nation: Bashu: a post-revolutionary Iranian film,” 240.



Figure 39 *Bashu*, Na'i and the reflection of Bashu's mother



Figure 40 *Bashu*, Na'i turning into Bashu's mother

Many films in the post-revolutionary years have turned to rural areas of Iran as opposed to urban environments. Jamsheed Akrami observes that in the years after the revolution, many directors depicted stories in rural settings to avoid the problem of dressing the female characters, although those films for the most part, like Kiarostami's *Koker* trilogy, lacked prominent female characters. Rural women traditionally already wore headscarves and their dresses were usually quite modest, but with more patterns

and colours than those of women in urban settings, who had to follow the Islamic dress codes.²⁸⁶

Bashu's presence is not free of scrutiny from the other villagers. They do not understand why Na'i houses him and feeds him without anything in return, but Na'i who protects him, does not listen to their opinions and continues her work. One day when they go to the weekly bazaar to sell their goods, Bashu helps Na'i to catch someone who had underpaid her. As a reward, she gives him some money to buy himself something, but when he wanders through the bazaar, he goes missing. Na'i looks everywhere for him but does not find him, and is very disappointed at him for not saying goodbye. The news reaches everyone in the village and they all come to her house. As everyone is sharing a piece of their mind on the matter, Bashu appears. Na'i is very happy, but the villagers all get up to protest and chase him. Bashu, who does not know what is going on, runs away and falls in a lake when he tries to cross it. The villagers realize he does not know how to swim, but no one does anything, so Na'i runs and gets her fishing net and rescues him. This is the ultimate scene showing Na'i's motherly affections towards Bashu (Figure 41).

²⁸⁶ Jamsheed Akrami, "Cinema II: Feature Films," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 5 ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa, CA: Publishers, 1991), 577.



Figure 41 *Bashu*, Na'i saves Bashu from drowning



Figure 42 *Bashu*, Performing a Zar

In a later scene Na'i becomes sick and Bashu returns her favor, looking after her and everything else. In the morning he makes sure everything is done perfectly on the land and he takes care of the two little children, feeding and bathing them, all the while hoping that Na'i will get better. However, her state worsens so he runs for the doctor, who has unfortunately gone to town. Bashu desperately gets back to Na'i and starts the procession of a traditional trance or healing dance unique to the region he comes from, called *Zar*.²⁸⁷ Bashu, by beating on the back of a big pot, starts a rhythm and chants along with it, acting as a *Baba Zar*, leading the ceremony. The patient's "reaction is usually expressed as a swinging of the upper body, vertical movements of the head, and the shaking of the shoulders."²⁸⁸ This heals Na'i and she regains her strength (Figure 42).

One of the most memorable scenes of this film is when the language barrier is broken. Throughout the film Na'i, who speaks in the Gilaki dialect, and Bashu, who speaks Arabic, find other means of communication. In one scene, all the children from the village have gathered after school. Seeing Bashu, they circle him and start making fun of him. Soon it turns into a group fight. Na'i runs to separate them and defend Bashu, but in the meantime he has fallen to the side. Right in front of him he finds a primary school Persian book. There is a sparkle in his eyes at seeing something familiar and he gets up and starts reading a passage from the book. The passage is about Iran and

²⁸⁷ *Zar* is a traditional trance dance from the Persian Gulf region of the Middle East and North Africa, although in every country it is slightly different, based on the dominant local culture. "Special ceremonies are held to pacify the *zār* and alleviate the patient's symptoms. These ceremonies, called by a leader, bring together the patient and those previously afflicted by the *zār* and involve incense, music, and movement."

Maria Sabaye Moghaddam, "Zar," *Encyclopedia of Iranica*, (online, Originally Published: 2009).

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

all the different nations and ethnicities within the country ending with “we are all the children of this country, Iran.” This action leads all the children to recognize that he is not a stranger anymore and start talking to him in standard Persian. They realize that, despite their differences, there is one thing that unifies them all: the Persian language (Figure 43).



Figure 43 *Bashu*, Reading Persian

The film ends with Na'i's husband returning home, having lost his right arm. The freedom and authority that Na'i has achieved throughout the film is lost upon the return of the symbolic figure of authority. In the film the only means of communication that Na'i and her husband have is through exchanging letters. Na'i, who is illiterate, usually has a member of their village write her letters while she dictates them; the same member of the village also reads aloud the letters she receives from her husband. In an earlier letter she explains that they have a visitor, Bashu, and asks his advice about what to do. In the first letter she receives after this he does not mention Bashu at all, indicating perhaps that he had not received her letter before writing his. When his letter is read out loud, the children and Bashu are also present. The father mentions everyone, even some of their neighbours, but he does not mention Bashu. Na'i's motherly instinct can read in Bashu's face that he is disappointed not to be mentioned. She takes the letter before the end and pretends to read the rest herself, saying, "...and about this little stranger Bashu, I hear he has grown up to be a man already and is helping the mother. I would like to meet him myself and thank him one day." This brings a huge smile to Bashu's face and makes him very happy. In a later letter the father does write about Bashu, but says it may not be very suitable for him to stay with them, as they are already under so much financial hardship. Bashu hears this and tries to run away, but Na'i, fully replacing the figure of authority in her house in the absence of her husband, fights with Bashu, even beating him with a stick to get him back inside. Bashu in return kisses the end of the stick, thanks her with his eyes, and returns home with her. The disobedience of a direct order from the head of the family brings Na'i to total

independence. Thus it is ironic that she loses all her agency in the end with the return of her husband, as Rahimieh also asserts, “for the film succeeds in its critique of Persian nationalism through the agency of a woman whose final resubmission to patriarchal family replicates the patterns of subordination the film lays bare in the discourse of nationalism.”²⁸⁹ Women in Iran have struggled with this question of what happens to them after the men are back in the years after the revolution, and more specifically after the end of the war. Not everyone accepted that they should return to where they had been before the men had gone and, as the next few films in this study also clearly show, many instead asked for more agency rather than giving up what they had achieved in the men’s absence.

²⁸⁹ Rahimieh, “Marking gender and difference in the myth of a nation: *Bashu*: a post-revolutionary Iranian film,” 251.

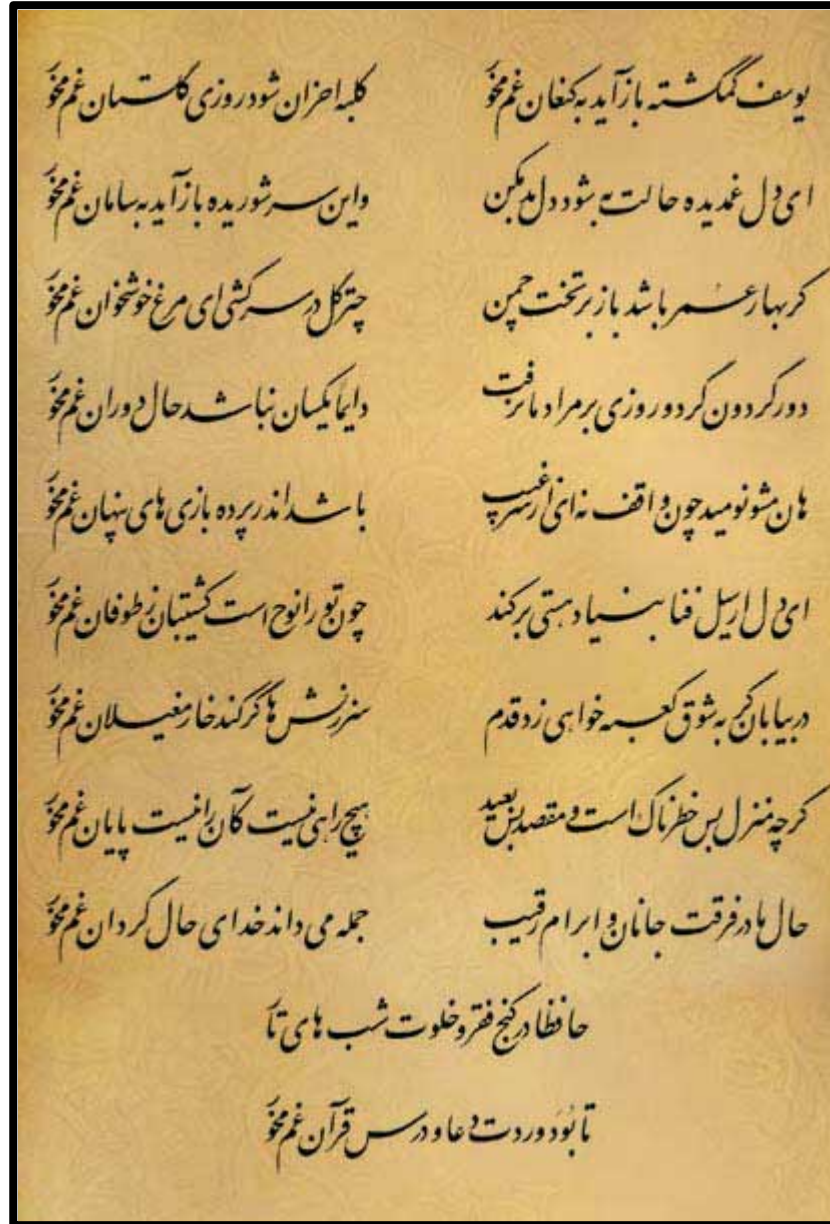


Figure 44 The Lost Joseph poem by Hafiz in Persian

The Lost Joseph

Your lost Joseph will return to Canaan, do not grieve
This house of sorrows will become a garden, do not grieve

Oh grieving heart, you will mend do not despair
This frenzied mind will return to calm, do not grieve

When the spring of life sets again in the meadows
A crown of flowers you will bear, singing bird, do not grieve

If these turning epochs do not move with our will today
The state of time is not constant, do not grieve

Lose hope not, for awareness cannot perceive the concealed
Behind the curtains hidden scenes play, do not grieve

Oh heart, should a flood of destruction engulf the world
If Noah is at your helm, do not grieve

As you step through the desert in desire of Ka'aba
The thorns may reproach you, do not grieve

Home may be perilous and destination out of reach
But there are no paths without an end, do not grieve

Our state in separation from friends and with demands of foes
The divine who turns circumstance knows all, do not grieve

Hafez, in the corner of poverty and loneliness of dark nights
Until your words echo prayers and lessons of Quran, do not grieve.²⁹⁰

Hafiz

Ebrahim Hatamikia, born in 1961 in Tehran, is one of the most prominent
filmmakers in Iran. His films are considered some of the best ever made in the genre of

²⁹⁰ Yousef e Gomgashteh/Lost Joseph, *A Sea Change Blog*.
<http://ghiasi.org/2009/06/yousef-e-gomgashtehlost-joseph/>. Accessed January 2012.

Iranian war cinema.²⁹¹ He started his career in film as a videographer/filmmaker assistant to war correspondent Morteza Avini. Avini's *Ravaayat-e Fath (Chronicles of Victory, 1980-1988)* is one of the most important war documentary series made during the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. This documentary series was not just a conventional reportage of the account of the war, it was a poetic account of the selfless men on the warfront. These documentaries were coupled with Avini's spiritual writing, which was presented as a voice-over. As Mehrzad Karimabadi observes, this series "stands out from other manifestos because it is distinguished with Avini's signature ideas expressed in voice-over [...] in every episode Avini reinforces the ideology of martyrs who have gone ahead and left the rest of us earthbound."²⁹²

The war genre became popular during and for a few years after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and was for the most part a vehicle for the government's pro-war propaganda. In the movies produced during this time, women were still on the periphery and played very small and insignificant parts. For the most part, independent woman characters are absent from the war films of the 1980s; most female characters are desexualized mothers, sisters, and wives. Except for *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, women are generally absent due to the predominantly frontline narratives, or else women are "desexualized" in the role of a protégé.²⁹³ The women's role in this genre was to propagate the importance of the war that in Iran was called *Defae Moghaddas* (The

²⁹¹ Michaël Abecassis, "Iranian War Cinema: Between Reality and Fiction." *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 3, (2011): 387-394.

²⁹² Mehrzad Karimabadi, "Manifesto of Martyrdom: similarities and differences between Avini's *Revayat-e Fath* [Chronicle of Victory] and more traditional manifestos." *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 3, (2011): 381-386.

²⁹³ Dabashi, *Close Up*, 228.

Sacred Defense) — the defense of both the faith and the country. The women (mothers and wives or sisters and daughters) all were employed in the films as moral support for the men at the front. They had no active role in most of the early films of this genre, but, similar to the other film genres in Iran, the 1990s introduced a different approach and phase. This chapter looks at one of the films of the genre's most notable director, Ebrahim Hatamikia's *Booy-e Pirahan-e Yusef (The Scent of Joseph's Shirt, 1994)*. This film is one of his early films that does employ a strong female central character.

Hatamikia started his career in 1986 and has sixteen feature films to his credit. All but his last three films fit in the war genre. Not all of his films depict war scenes, but they are concerned with the effects of war on people's lives and on society in general. His most famous film, *Az Karkheh ta Rhein (From Karkheh to Rhein, 1993)*, is the account of a wounded soldier who lost his vision due to the chemical gas that was used by Iraq during the war. He was sent to Germany to have an operation after the war. His sister, who married a German man and lives in Germany, acts as his link with the strange world he is visiting. The film is a commentary on the situation of the veteran of the war as well as on the people's understanding of their situation. Hatamikia stays with this theme of the veterans and the way society deals with these "heroes" for some time. The two best examples of his work on this matter are *Azhans-e Shishe-i (The Glass Agency, 1999)* and *Ertefae Past (Low Altitude, 2002)*. In *The Glass Agency*, Haj Kazem is a symbol of those who sacrificed their lives, families, jobs, and education to defend the country, but now that he has returned he has been left behind. The film takes place in the closed space of a travel agency in which Haj Kazem has taken everyone hostage

to bring attention to the fact that a fellow patriot and veteran of the war is in need of medical attention, and to survive he has to go abroad. *Ertefae Past*, which is an adaptation of a true story, is the story of a desperate man, Ghasem, who can't find a proper job and security in postwar Iran. Out of hopelessness, he plans to hijack a plane with all his family onboard in order to leave Iran. Although he had planned this far, he had no idea where he would ask the pilot to go after he took charge of the plane. This film also ends in tragedy, as does *Azhans-e Shishe-i*. In *Azhans-e Shishe-i* Haj Kazem's friend doesn't manage to go abroad; in *Ertefae Past* the plane crashes somewhere in the mountains. Michaël Abecassis asserts "for Hatamikia the solution and the source of salvation for these leftovers of the war are outside the Iranian borders in Europe, just like in his other film *From Karkheh to [Rhein]*."²⁹⁴

The female characters in Hatamikia's films usually do have a visible presence, even though they may not be the main characters. In fact, his films since the 1990s gradually gained more prominent female characters, starting with *From Karkheh to Rhein*. His last three films all have very dominant female characters and the narratives even portray taboo topics relating to women. One of his latest, entitled *Davat* (*Invitation*, 2008) is an episodic film consisting of five stories. Five different couples from different walks of life and different ages all realize they are going to have a baby. They have five different reactions — and yes, the idea of abortion *does* pass every couple's mind. What makes this film a step forward for Iranian cinema is the fact that finally there is a film addressing this issue. However, as expected from a film made in

²⁹⁴ Abecassis, "Iranian War Cinema: Between Reality and Fiction," 393.

Iran that has to go through the tight censorship of the MCIG, none of the couples does go ahead to have an abortion after all, as abortion is considered an illegal and murderous act in Iran.

The film *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt* is Hatamikia's first female-centric film. The drama centers on hopeful families waiting for their captive loved ones to come home after the war. Iraq did not release all the Iranian prisoners of war (POWs) right at the end of the war; they continued to hold them for sometime thereafter. Soon after the POWs' release many families were surprised by the return of their sons, fathers, and brothers, who they had thought had been martyred.



Figure 45 *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, A collection of shots showing the anticipation of people for the return of their POWs

The list of names had not been released to the Iranian officials correctly. Some people whose names were on the list did not come back, and many did come back whose names were not on the list, so the feeling of suspense this film conveys was the feeling of many families who had already buried their loved one and had mourned their loss.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ Many martyrs' bodies were not found and only the news along with a painted headshot of them were sent back to the families. The families would have a memorial ceremony for their lost one and bury some of his belongings in an empty grave. This way the family could give him a final and physical resting

This film also plays with the ambiguity of the question of death when it comes to the soldiers missing in action (MIA).²⁹⁶ Throughout the film there are shots that imply this anticipation. In any public place throughout the film the protagonist watches the TV that is showing POWs returning (all stock footage). On a few occasions while driving, the characters witness banners at the end of streets welcoming heroes coming home. In one scene they even have to stop the car because a POW has arrived home at the same moment and people have blocked the way welcoming him; the streets are decorated by colourful lights and there are flowers everywhere (Figure 45). Also, as the last shot in Figure 45 shows, many families would bring a photograph of their missing loved one and show it to the returned POWs, hoping that they would recognize them and have news of their whereabouts.

In this film two narratives are entangled with one another. On the one hand there is a hopeful father whom everyone calls Da'i (maternal uncle in Persian), who is an airport taxi driver. His son Yusef is MIA, and despite the fact that they have found his nameplate without him, deep down Da'i believes his son is still alive. On the other hand there is Shirin, the female protagonist whose brother is a POW. She has been living in France for years and has returned to find her brother, who she hopes will come home soon.

place, which in reality works as a place for them to visit regularly and mourn their lost ones. All the cemeteries in Iran have a martyr section, which usually contains more photographs or paintings of the smiling headshots of the martyrs alongside the graves than any other section.

Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*. (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 269.

²⁹⁶ Varzi, "A Ghost in the Machine: the Cinema of the Iranian Sacred Defence," 162.

The film starts with a wedding scene. Yusef had been engaged to his cousin, Sadigheh, for years, and since he has been missing she has been waiting for his return. However, after they bring the news that Yusef is most likely dead, Da'i makes it his business to make sure she gets married and starts a new life. He knew his other nephew also was interested in Sadigheh and the film starts with their distant marriage. The groom lives abroad; they are going to perform the ceremony over the phone and that night she will fly to where he is. Before the actual ceremony the groom asks to talk to the bride one last time. Someone among the guests puts the phone on speaker, leaving her no privacy, but the bride still keeps the phone to her ear as if she has not noticed it is on speaker. He asks if she really loves him and whether she is still waiting for Yusef's return. She does not get a chance to reply as the line is cut and the electricity goes out. The scene ends with everyone clapping as a sign that the marriage has gone through. In this scene, although the groom is physically absent, his photograph is present next to the bride in white, and for a short period while on the phone, we have his image and his sound at the same time, although not in synch. Hatamikia's comment on the existence of an escape beyond the country's borders is also evident in this film: the groom lives abroad, and the bride is going to join him there away from this chaos. There is another commentary here as well on the war itself, and the fact that it tears families apart and sends people away — both those who have gone to war and those who perhaps, like the groom, have fled it.



Figure 46 *The Scent of Joseph's shirt*, Opening scene, the wedding

After the wedding ceremony the film cuts to the bride in Da'i's taxi driving to the airport. On the way she tries to convince Da'i that he should accept reality; Da'i smiles and changes the subject. At the airport, right before she is to pass through Customs, Da'i asks her whether she loves her husband or not. She replies with surprise, "Yes, of course," and then Da'i asks her to give back Yusef's nameplate. She is sad, but gives him the nameplate anyway and leaves (Figure 46).

On the way to his car after Sadigheh has left, Da'i, who does not want to work that night, sees a non-airport taxi driver taking Shirin's luggage to his car. He tries to warn the man of his illegal action, but he ignores Da'i and walks faster. Then Da'i turns to Shirin and says, "If I were you I would be more careful young lady." A couple of minutes later she comes and asks Da'i to take her home as she has listened to him and did not go with the unofficial driver, but now there are no taxis in the airport. Da'i, who is a very kind-hearted man, agrees to take her to her house uptown. On the way they exchange stories and Da'i wishes her the best of luck. However, the new caretaker at her house does not know her and has changed the locks. Shirin, who indicates she has no relatives she can go to, asks Da'i to take her to a hotel instead. Da'i then invites her to his home where he lives with his daughter, Nasrin, and granddaughter while his son-in-law, also a war veteran, is abroad for treatment for his injury.

The two girls, Shirin and Nasrin, become friends and talk about their experiences. Nasrin shows Shirin video clips of her brother and her husband who were best friends and comrades at war. They were divers and during one of their missions crossing through a deeper part of the river, Yusef had gone missing. Days later, the locals had caught a shark and they found Yusef's nameplate in its stomach (Figure 47). This is when they had to accept that he had died. They had a memorial service for Yusef and buried some of his belongings in an empty grave, but Da'i still does not truly believe his son is dead. Nasrin also tells Shirin that Da'i, who has a great sense of humour, says he should have named Yusef Yunes instead. Shirin is not familiar with the Quranic and Biblical stories and asks why. Nasrin explains the story of Jonah the

prophet who is famous for being swallowed by a whale, but with God's will he stayed alive.



Figure 47 *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, Finding Yusef's nameplate in the shark's stomach

What is also interesting in this film is the play on names from folklore and religious stories. The title of the film connotes that the account of this film is the same as the story of Yusef (Joseph) the prophet and Yaghub (Jacob)'s son, another Quranic story. After Yaghub's other sons bring the news of Yusef's death, he sinks into depression and he does not believe Yusef is dead. It is said that he loses his eyesight due to all the crying for his lost son, but that he will regain his sight upon Yusef's return. This story of waiting is beautifully reflected in a ghazal (sonnet) by Hafiz entitled "The Missing Joseph" (Figure 44), which counsels hope, for there is good news coming: "do

not grieve.” Shirin and her brother Khosrow’s names are not selected by chance either. Khosrow and Shirin are the two main characters in a Persian love story that is retold by several classical poets.²⁹⁷ In this story, Shirin has to wait a long time before she is reunited with her love Khosrow, and on the way there are several tragedies and obstacles. This is exactly what happens to Shirin in this film: she is not united with her brother right away, and the road there is not particularly straight either.

Hatamikia raises some very important issues regarding the effect of war on people’s lives, in a dramatic scene when Da’i’s son-in-law, Asghar, returns home early. He had cut his treatment trip short when he heard they were releasing POWs. He said he had to come and be there himself when they were returning. Shirin also goes to the airport to welcome him, and with Da’i and a friend (played by the director himself), they take Asghar home to see his wife and daughter. This scene is very important because, as discussed in the earlier chapters, expressing emotion between men and women in Iranian films is not straightforward, but directors find different ways to convey it.

²⁹⁷ The story is told from a historical perspective in Ferdowsi’s epic *Shahnameh*, and Nezami retold the story in a romantic epic by the title of *Khosrow and Shirin*.



Figure 48 *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, Asghar returns

Asghar's injury has left the right side of his face damaged. On the way back in Da'i's taxi he asks Shirin a question and asks her to promise to tell him the truth. After she assures him she will tell the truth, he asks, "Can my wife stand this face?" His question startles both Da'i and the fourth passenger in the car, but Asghar shouts, reiterating,

“You don’t get it, I am going to see my wife just now!” Shirin does not reply right away, but right before he leaves she tells him, “I am sure the man she loves is more than just a face.” This simple conversation conveys a very deep issue that many have faced after the war. What if his wife really can’t stand this change? This issue is also addressed in the film *The Fifth Reaction* discussed in Chapter 5. One of Fereshteh’s friends is the wife of a returned POW, who admits he has changed, and the heated love they’d had for one another is gone after his return. However, she can’t divorce him, because, as she asserts, “Who divorces a war hero?” This question is also important because it makes them both human. Humans are attracted to physical beauty. What makes this film more accessible is that it goes beyond the propaganda and spiritual teachings of someone who has sacrificed his life for his country and his faith. In a way, Hatamikia brings his characters down to earth with this question, to what people really faced after the war rather than the good that is awaiting them in heaven after they die.

This scene continues with Asghar meeting his wife and daughter for the first time after his injury. Asghar, seeing his wife and daughter waiting by the door, asks Da’i to stop a bit farther from the house. Then he gets out and walks towards them. It is dark, but his daughter recognizes him from his silhouette and starts running towards him, but when she gets close enough that she can see his face she seems to pause! In reaction to this Shirin is shown crying. Asghar kneels down and open his arms for his daughter, and after a bit of hesitation the little girl finally runs towards him and jumps in his arms. The fourth passenger, seeing this, shouts at Da’i and tells him that if he is not

going to drive he will get out of the taxi. The car drives away and we don't get to witness Asghar embracing his wife (Figure 48).

Living alone in France, Shirin's character is very independent. Through the story we know that both of her parents have passed away, that she only has the one brother, and that she is not married. She has come all the way to Iran to welcome her brother home. Being around Da'i and his family, she soon gets into a more excited mood and hopes for the return of her brother. Da'i helps her to get her house ready; they even put up lights in the garden and into the alleyway.

One day a man contacts her saying he has been in Khosrow's division at the prison and that he has some news of him. Both she and Da'i go to visit him with flowers and he soon shares enough information about Khosrow that Shirin is confident he knows her brother. However, on the way out he asks to talk to Da'i alone and he reveals that he believes Khosrow is dead. Khosrow was a surgeon and the Iraqis had asked him to operate on one of their soldiers who had been attacked by the Iranian prisoners. The Iraqi soldier died, and they took Khosrow away to be executed. The man asks Da'i to break this news to Shirin. Da'i becomes very angry and asks whether he has seen him dead or not, to which the man answers that no, he did not witness Khosrow's death, but they say he is dead. Da'i replies, "How can you say that when you have not seen it with your own eyes?" He looks disappointedly at the man, saying, "Why did you contact her? Now you made her more hopeful, what can I tell her?"

Da'i hides the information from Shirin. The Hitchcockian suspense continues for awhile, and she becomes more and more hopeful that any day her brother will walk through the door. However, Khosrow's friend from prison feels this on his conscience and pays her a visit to give his condolences. He finds out she still does not know the *truth* and tells her. Shirin becomes very angry with Da'i; she gets in a quarrel with him and accuses him of wanting to turn her into a lunatic like himself. Her next reaction is that there is nothing more left for her in Iran, so she packs and leaves for the airport without telling anyone.

Meanwhile Asghar, who has gone to the border to help with the arrival of POWs, calls Da'i and say he believes Khosrow is coming in the next group. Da'i becomes very excited and goes to Shirin's room to give her the news. Instead he finds out that she has gone to the airport to fly back to Paris. He catches Shirin at the last moment, gives her the news, and offers to drive her down to the border. Very appropriately, the border they were to go to is called *Ghasr-e Shirin (Shirin's Palace)*. She accepts his offer with astonishment and they drive south together.



Figure 49 *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, The scene from the journey to the south

The journey to the south is depicted like a journey of a Sufi into a trance state. It also resembles the trance dance of *Zar* that was depicted in *Bashu, the Little Stranger*. The music of this film is one of its most memorable elements. Hatamikia always works with the composer and songwriter Majid Entezami, who can be described as Iran's John

Williams. Entezami's work, like Williams', is always accompanied by large-scale orchestral music and is highly thematic. The music during the journey is unique and takes charge of the whole scene. It has the element of repetitive drum strokes, which is common in the music used in a *Zar* procession. The music, in combination with the swinging nameplate hanging from the rearview window of the car, plus Shirin moving from side to side, conveys her trance state. From the whole journey only the segment of the travel through a very long tunnel is depicted. In the tunnel, Shirin's inner excitement turns into a rhythmic movement from side to side (like the involuntarily movement of a Sufi going into trance) and then in its climax she rolls down the window for more air. She starts calling Khosrow's name slowly and then screams his name. This scene is the moment of release for Shirin's character, as if she goes through all the boundaries and breaks free as the car reaches light by coming out of the tunnel (Figure 49).

The final scene is one of the most dramatic, but it also has some elements of realism that add a whole other layer to the film. When they arrive at the meeting point, Shirin and Da'i witness the same scene that they (and we) had witnessed throughout the film on the television: buses after buses arriving full of POWs with many people waiting for them at the border. They all look very thin and typically have shaved heads and mustaches (a signature of Saddam Hussein, which forced all the Iranian POWs to shave their beards but grow mustaches).



Figure 50 *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, The final scene, father and son reunited

When they arrive, Da'i finds Asghar and asks where should they go. Meanwhile, Shirin stands by the road and watches the buses pass by, witnessing a woman running after one, which stops for her man to get out. Shirin shares her joy at the reunion with a smile, but then she sees someone she recognizes in one of the buses. She is excited; Da'i, without asking, gets the car so that they can start chasing the bus. When they get closer and Shirin manages to attract the attention of the man who she thinks is Yusef, he turns back and looks at them. Da'i sees him too. He freezes, can't drive any longer and goes into the side of the road. Shirin switches with him and they drive back to take the bus. The second time the car gets side by side with the bus, the father and son recognize one another. The shot of the father and son both extending their arms out of the window resembles Michelangelo's God and Adam in The Creation of Adam, part of the fresco of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Finally the bus stops, Shirin stops the car a bit further on, and Da'i runs towards the bus. Yusef is now fully visible and we see that he is missing an arm. Da'i reaches him, they embrace, and the film ends (Figure 50).

Da'i's belief has kept Yusef alive and he finally returns. Varzi argues that the return of the POWs "present[s] the return of something that should have remained buried."²⁹⁸ Using the motto of martyrdom, she argues MIA's returning "marks the failure of martyrdom" because men were sent off to war to be martyrs. The return of these fragmented bodies carrying a sign of the injustice of war in their missing limbs is what Iranian cinema employs to criticize the dominant image of the war and the mourning for the loss of loved ones in comparison to the reaction of those who *are* still

²⁹⁸ Varzi, "A Ghost in the Machine: the Cinema of the Iranian Sacred Defence," 165.

alive. This is the story of the subsequent films by Hatamikia, criticizing the dominant discourse regarding the idolization of the dead and forgetting the ones who survived.²⁹⁹

Shirin is the symbol of all the women who had waited for the return of their men, but what makes her different from all the other women depicted in Iranian war films is her liberty. She is very independent, not subject to any boundaries. In fact, she has no relations, only some new acquaintances, and she does not have the direct figure of authority, a father or a husband. Although her brother could take that position, he is absent — the same as Na'i's husband who was absent. This freedom that Shirin's character possesses gives her the total agency that the women in the other films and, in fact, the character of Da'i's daughter do not possess. In the patriarchal Iranian society, a single woman over the age of eighteen possesses the most freedom that she can ever possess. In contrast to married women or those under eighteen, she does not need a man's consent to either get a passport or to travel. Shirin fits into that category, and this is also shown by her quick decision to leave Iran as soon as she believes Khosrow is dead.

²⁹⁹ See *Azhans-e Shishe-i* (*The Glass Agency*, 1999) and *Erefae past* (*The Low Latitude*, 2002)

Daruish Mehrjui is one of the most enduring Iranian filmmakers/scholars in Iran, with 25 feature films in a career spanning over forty years. He is one of the filmmakers responsible for creating the renaissance of Iranian cinema and starting the New Wave movement with his film *Gav (The Cow)*, 1968) as discussed in Chapter 3. Mehrjui has a strong connection with literature: most of his masterpieces are adaptations of important literary works, both by Iranian and non-Iranian authors. He is a director who, although he does have a certain style that connects his films and shows his directorial authorship, has tackled several different genres throughout his long career. He has films dealing with social issues depicting the underclass as well as more allegorical films, which mostly depict middle-class Iranians. He also has a few comedies (arguably dark comedies) to his credit too, such as *Ejareneshinha (The Tenants)*, 1987) and *Mehman-e Maman (Mum's Guest)*, 2004).

Jamsheed Akrami nicely summarizes Mehrjui's pre-revolutionary films as they all point "albeit indirectly to circumvent the censorship codes, to a cruel social system that offers nothing but injustice to its most deprived citizens."³⁰⁰ Mehrjui himself admits that after the revolution he moved away from what he calls "cinema of the dispossessed." Akrami finds it strange that while Iranian cinema after the revolution moved towards depicting the more disadvantaged classes, Mehrjui moved from

³⁰⁰ Akrami, "Sustaining a wave for thirty years: the cinema of Dariush Mehrjui," 129-135.

depicting dispossessed characters to mainly depicting middle-class characters. His most renowned film after the revolution is *Hamoun* (1990), in which he portrays the intellectual middle class in Iran for the first time. This film depicts “an increasingly perplexed middle-aged intellectual caught in the stifling web of marital and professional setbacks within the context of a society in rapid transition.”³⁰¹

Then, later in the 1990s as Iranian cinema as a whole was moving towards films centred on women, Mehrjui made four controversial female-centric films that one way or another all addressed the dilemmas surrounding women’s choices.³⁰² The first of these four films was *Banoo* (*The Lady*, 1992), which has many thematic similarities to Luis Bunuel’s *Viridiana*. This film is about a depressed rich woman who finds out her husband is living with someone else. After her husband moves out, her life starts to change and she begins to see the world around her anew. Her despair then turns into compassion and she ends up allowing her new homeless friends and her gardener and his sick wife to move in with her. This then turns her beautiful house into a shipwreck full of people who do not have any respect for anything valuable in the mansion. The new tenants steal and rampage through everything. Perhaps the mansion was symbolically read to depict Iran as a country and those inappropriate newcomers resembled the newly established ruling power in Iran too closely. It was withheld from the screen for seven years before it was released with many alterations in 1998 and screened at the 49th Berlin Film Festival in 1999.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 132.

³⁰² Norma Claire Moruzzi, “Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 92.

These films all have simple one-word titles, usually the name of the protagonist. The second of the four films with a female protagonist is *Sara* (1993), which is examined in detail in this chapter. The next film is *Pari* (1995), which is inspired by J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey* (1961).³⁰³ It depicts an angry literature student at the University of Tehran who pours out her anger at her professor, her fiancé, and her brother — all the authoritative men in her life. *Pari*, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, follows the teachings of an old Sufi book called *Soluk*, goes through a journey of self-revelation to find out who she really is.

The last of these four films is *Leila* (1998), a drama set in a rich upper-middle-class family. Leila finds out that she is infertile soon after her happy marriage begins. Her controlling mother-in-law will not accept the fact they are happy and don't want children. She makes it her son's responsibility to think about the future of their family as the only son, meaning he needs to produce an heir. Finally, she suggests that he takes a second wife. This is Leila's dilemma, but she finally gives in and agrees to him taking a new wife. However, it affects their relationship and she cannot bear it in the end.

Sara (1993) is an Iranian adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1871). This chapter focuses on what is relevant to the thesis's argument about the development of female characters in Iranian cinema and will not discuss the aesthetics of the adaptation or the fact that the play is considered controversial for the women's rights

³⁰³ Jesse McKinley, "Iranian Film Is Cancelled After Protest By Salinger," (*The New York Times*, 1998). <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/21/movies/iranian-film-is-canceled-after-protest-by-salinger.html>. Accessed Jan 2012.

movement. The only important point worth noting here is the criticism of the marriage norms, which is also reflected in this adaptation, whether it be in nineteenth-century Europe for Ibsen or later twentieth-century Iran for Mehrjui. Although there are some differences in the plot between this adaptation and Ibsen's play, some details, such as the fact that a woman needs an adult male cosigner for the bond to get the loan, have not been changed. This is a commentary on the issue of women's rights in Iran that is as dated as something that was an issue in nineteenth-century Europe.

Sara supports this thesis's argument concerning the gradual change in the agency of women represented in films in Iran. On the surface, in this film the protagonist resembles the passive *good* women characters introduced in the history of Iranian cinema, but under the surface she is a woman with agency. Sara, played by Niki Karimi, is the perfect daughter, wife, and mother in people's eyes — it is made clear throughout the film that people's perception is highly valued — but it is all a masquerade. To use Mulvey's wording, Sara performs throughout the film for Hessam (her husband)'s "gaze and masquerade as the perfect to-be-looked at image."³⁰⁴ Sara works hard to keep this masquerade going without Hessam knowing her true self. She does this despite her deepest feeling of pride for having saved her family "just as a man would."

³⁰⁴ Mulvey afterthought. P.16



Figure 51 *Sara*, The opening scene in the hospital

The camera always stays with Sara in this film, except for one short but key scene. The camera is static unless Sara is on the move; there are several traveling shots in the film and all of them are depicting Sara going (usually pacing) from one location to another. The sole concentration of the film is Sara; there are many close-ups of her expressing different reactions throughout the film, which is very much dependent on

Niki Karimi's performance: the audience witnesses everything firsthand through her emotional reactions and then the reverse shot reveals what she is seeing. The only other film in this study that stays solely with its female protagonist throughout is *Be Hamin Sadegi* (*As Simple as That*, 2005) which is discussed in the next chapter.

The film starts with Sara running into a hospital and up the stairs. In the middle of the flight of stairs she pauses and puts her hand on her belly; her body language conveys she is pregnant. After a brief stop in her husband Hessam's room she runs out, looking for the doctor, and eventually finds him after going through many doors and rooms. Sara follows the doctor, who is also on the move. As they walk, he explains that her husband has a severe case of cancer and he urgently needs a bone marrow transplant. He also stresses that the kind of treatment he needs is only available in a small number of hospitals in Europe, and that if he is to survive he needs to hurry up and go. She then begs him not to let her husband know how bad his situation is. She thinks to herself for a short time, then, as her face brightens up with a faint smile, she assures the doctor that she will make sure they do what he suggests. She goes back to her husband's room where she sees Goshtasb, her husband's coworker, who seems to know his situation and quietly offers her any assistance she may need (Figure 51). The faint smile she showed in the presence of the doctor conveys the whole plot of the film. This is her chance, her moment to shine: for the first time she gets to decide their fate.

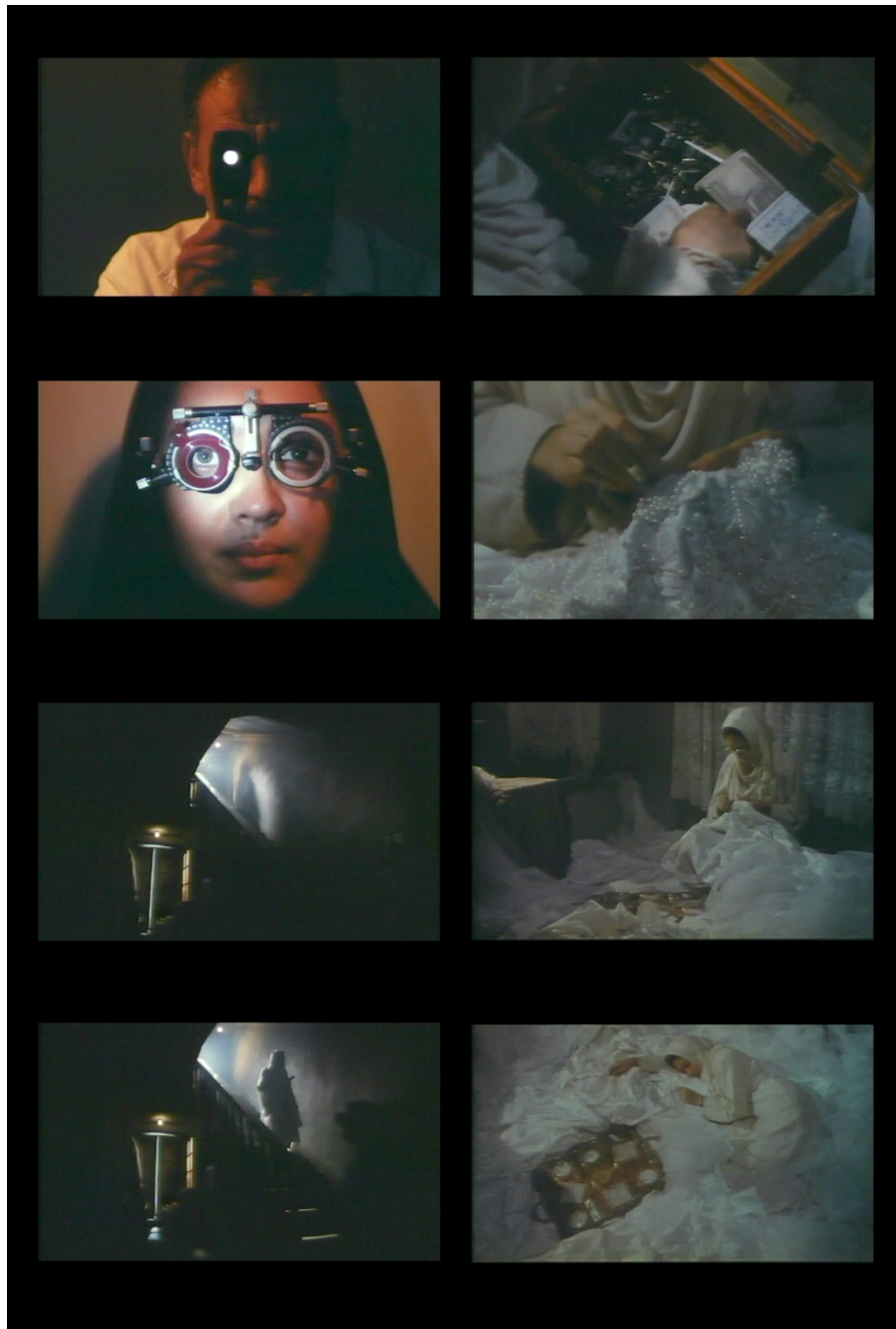


Figure 52 *Sara*, Sara's secret work

At the end of this scene the camera fades to black, fading back in “Three years later.” This scene reveals Sara’s master plan through a montage sequence. A couple of shots at the optometrist imply her eyes have gotten worse in a short space of time. The

doctor looks at her with astonishment and says, “What do you do with your eyes?” and adds, “You must be reading a lot!” Here the doctor makes a judgment, implying that it cannot be because she is working. This kind of passing judgment is one of the underlying commentaries that Mehrjui has added to this film, criticizing the construct of people’s relations in society. The scene reveals she works in the middle of the night, embroidering wedding dresses and other silk material in order to make money (Figure 52).

This scene is followed by one in which she meets an old friend, Simin, who has come to visit her after living abroad for a while. Simin’s husband has passed away leaving her with no money, so she has decided to come back to Iran. Simin, who has some experience working in an international bank, hopes Sara’s husband, who has just been promoted to a managerial position at a bank, will be able to give her a job. Sara’s character in this scene is at her happiest and she admits to Simin that she has a secret that is suffocating her to keep to herself.

Sara, like a bird in a cage who has seen a glimpse of freedom, confides in her friend. She reveals her secret to Simin with much pride and excitement which is evident in Niki Karimi’s facial expression (Figure 53). Simin, who is an independent and free-spirited character, does not find her story that compelling. With surprise, she asks her why she has not already told Hessam the truth.



Figure 53 *Sara*, The scene in which Sara shares her secret with Simin

In a visit to Hessam's work with Simin, Sara sees Goshtasb. Simin and Goshtasb's encounter at the bank shows they had a history together before Simin was married. Simin admits she thinks he had left his wife for her. Later in the scene when Sara is leaving the bank alone, it is revealed that Goshtasb lent her the money three years ago for Hessam's treatment. She has almost paid it all back with interest; only two more payments are left.

Goshtasb now needs Sara's help, because Hessam is going to dismiss him for illegal transactions he has made in the past, and tries to talk to Sara when she is leaving the bank. Goshtasb asks her to use her influence on Hessam to save his job. Sara says there is nothing she can do, but also that she will pay his money back very soon. Goshtasb follows her down the stairs to the street and finally threatens her, saying that he is capable of anything if he loses his job (Figure 54). This scene is empowering for Sara's character: although Goshtasb tries to make her stop through the hallway and on the staircase all the way downstairs, he can't manage it, and is left chasing her like a hungry dog. The only moment she inevitably pauses is when he says he may tell Hessam everything. In an earlier scene, Hessam comments how much he disapproves of borrowing money from people, and he even says that he would rather go broke than borrow from others, let alone from Goshtasb. That is why Sara has kept this secret from him all along.

Throughout the film Sara acts in a different manner with her husband than with Goshtasb. It is unclear until much later in the film which one is really her true self — whether she is the submissive character who she pretends to be with Hessam or the strong and independent woman who can confront a cunning man like Goshtasb.



Figure 54 *Sara*, Goshtasb trying to convince Sara to help him save his job

This event makes Sara try to repay Goshtasb's money sooner than had been arranged. She also tries to influence her husband, which not only fails to help but actually makes Hessam want to dismiss Goshtasb sooner. Hessam is a typical man with a patriarchal mindset who, after finding out Goshtasb has confronted his wife in order to save his job, feels his *namus* (his honour defined through his female relations) threatened.

Goshtasb's harassment does not end here. When she takes the money to Goshtasb, he does not take it and instead threatens to take her to court for having forged her father's signature. (Having needed a cosigner, she had forged her father's signature three days after his death. Her father's death had been the cover for her brave action, as she told Hessam that the money had come from him, and as he was supposedly the person who signed the bonds, which enabled her to borrow the money.) Goshtasb gives her a final chance to use her (non-existent) influence on her husband regarding his job.

After Hessam announces his decision regarding Goshtasb's job, the latter shows up at Sara's home, waits for her to return home, and invites himself into the house. They quarrel and Sara tries to convince him to have compassion and not to destroy her marriage, but he declares that he does not have any compassion for anyone now that he has lost everything he has worked so hard for. He shows a letter to her and says he has written everything in it for Hessam. Now it is Hessam who has to accept his terms, and to avoid losing his reputation he has to hire Goshtasb at a higher position than he previously held (Figure 55).



Figure 55 *Sara*, Goshtasb reveals the letter he has written for Hessam

In an act of desperation, Sara asks Simin to help her by stopping the letter from reaching Hessam in the internal mail at the bank. The irony is that Simin has started a job at the bank, and after Goshtasb leaves she will take his position. Simin and Sara go to the bank, but they miss the mail delivery and the letter has already gone to Hessam's desk. Simin, who thinks she still has influence over Goshtasb, comforts her and promises to do something to ensure that Goshtasb takes his letter back from Hessam before he reads it.

The scene between Simin and Goshtasb is the only scene in which Sara is absent. In a situation of Hitchcockian suspense the viewer sees that Simin's attempt to change Goshtasb's mind was successful. However, in the end it is Simin who, in response to Goshtasb's question as to whether he should get his letter back from Hessam, says no and that it is better for their marriage if Hessam knows the truth (Figure 56). Although in the midst of the drama Simin's act seems like an act of jealousy, perhaps looking at the bigger picture she actually saves Sara from a life full of lies and liberates her.



Figure 56 *Sara*, Simin convincing Goshtasb to take his letter back from Hessam

This flirtatious scene between Simin and Goshtasb is a great example that supports this study's argument that the concept of the "averted look," introduced into Islamic discourse in Iran by Naficy, can no longer be applied to films after the 1990s. In this scene, Simin enters Goshtasb's room while he is out, and when he returns she is sitting in his chair. She welcomes him with a big, inviting smile that expresses the romantic connection they had once shared. This reunion is confirmed in the final scene when they both, as a couple, come to Sara's house with flowers. "Hamid Naficy explains that when the direct gaze of desire was prohibited in cinema after the Islamic revolution, the averted and unfocused gaze, signaling modest relations between men and women began to predominate the screen."³⁰⁵ As Figure 56 demonstrates, the reverse shot of Simin and Goshtasb is neither averted nor unfocused. The third image down depicts an over-the-shoulder shot of Goshtasb talking to Simin, which portrays their physical proximity while acting the scene. This also removes any doubt as to whether the female actor is truly sweet-talking before the male actor or not.

³⁰⁵ Mottahedeh, "Where are Kiarostami's women?", 318.



Figure 57 *Sara*, Sara goes after Hessam to bring him home

That night Sara had planned a party to celebrate Hessam's promotion, and she works hard to prepare while worrying herself sick about Hessam's reaction to the letter when he comes home. However, when he arrives, he says he has been out in a meeting all day, conveying that he has not been to the office and therefore that he has not had a

chance to see the letter. The party goes well and, like always, Hessam shows that he is content with his little lady's hard work at home.

The next day Sara anticipates the worst while wishing for the best. While she believes it is impossible for Hessam to forgive her and actually come and thank her for her hard work all these years, she still wishes for it to end that way. But Hessam never calls and is still not home very late in the evening. She calls at midnight and he hangs up on her. She goes to his work to pick him up, asking him to come home. On the way back in the dark, Sara walks behind Hessam and he constantly blames her for her wrong deed. He does not thank her even for a split second. He says, "Now I have to listen to whatever he says or asks, all because of some woman's stupidity! You should have let me die, it was hundred times better than this disgrace." His worst reaction is pausing and asking, "What did he ask in return for giving you the money?" implying there must have been some sexual favors. Then Hessam decides they should keep themselves safe from people's scorn by pretending everything is fine and keeping their life as it is, but that Sara is not qualified to bring up their child anymore and that the whole responsibility will go to the nanny (Figure 57). Sara doesn't say anything in these shots, just follows him home. The next day he calls in sick and stays at home, and Sara makes food for him and looks after the house and does all the chores.

The following day Simin and Goshtasb show up at their house with flowers. Simin explains that Goshtasb is here to apologize and return all the bonds. Sara, who is indifferent to their presence, gets the money she owes him and Goshtasb walks upstairs

to talk to Hessam. Goshtasb had anticipated Hessam not seeing him, and had written him a letter. He leaves the letter and they leave the house. Hessam, who is still in bed, summons Sara upstairs a couple minutes later. When she gets to the room, he has changed back to his normal happy state. He explains everything he read in the letter, saying he is saved. Sara, seeing this, is very disappointed in him and says she is leaving him. Hessam, surprised, does not understand her reaction. She goes downstairs, collects her belongings, and calls a cab.

The mise en scene of this scene is unique; Sara's movement in the scene is similar to her movement in scenes with Goshtasb and not those with Hessam. While in the scene at night coming back from work she is the one following in Hessam's footsteps, in this scene it is Hessam who is following her up and down the stairs. To add to his vulnerability and empowering her further, he is in his pajamas, wrapped in a sheet that inhibits his movement. Mehrjui employs such methods throughout the film whenever depicting one character in a powerful position relative to the other. Throughout the scene between Simin and Goshtasb for example, Goshtasb stands in front of Simin while she is comfortably sitting down in his seat.

A lot is revealed in this short final scene. When Sara goes to call the cab, she puts on her glasses to find the telephone number. Hessam, who has not noticed thus far that she even wears glasses, is surprised by the thick glasses she is wearing. When packing her essentials she goes to her safe place in the basement and he sees where she has spent many lonely nights stitching. When going downstairs, Hessam is still thinking

he is in the right, and says she is leaving because she does not love him anymore. Sara looks at him and says, “Correct, I don’t love you anymore.” While in the basement she starts saying that deep down she could not believe that he would not stand behind her and say to Goshtasb that it would be all right if the whole world knew what had happened. She even says she thought that when it came to it, he would take responsibility for her actions. However, he sacrificed nothing for her, when she had sacrificed so much with no reward. Hessam then says, “All the happiness in my life was to work hard and provide for my wife and child, but believe me — no man would lose his *sharaf* [honor] and *aberru* [reputation] for a woman and love.” Leaving the basement, Sara comments, “But that is exactly what women do all the time.”

Sara then takes the child and Hessam doesn’t say much to prevent her. At the door she says she will send Simin to get the rest of her belongings later on. Hessam, who still does not believe she is leaving forever, asks her for how long she is leaving, and what people would say. She replies in a very relaxed way, saying that people always say something, walks out the door, and gets into the taxi. Hessam at the end is speechless; Sara is so determined that there is nothing he can say to change her mind (Figure 58).



Figure 58 *Sara*, Final scene; Sara leaving

Julie Holledge criticizes this Mehrjui adaptation of *A Doll's House* and another Zambian adaptation that both have the mother taking the child with her when leaving the husband, in contrast to Ibsen's original. She says that these "interpretations silence

the anxiety provoked by a mother leaving her children.” However, when looking at the issue of child custody in Iran, it is quite obvious why Mehrjui has decided that Sara’s character leave the house with the child. The fact is that the father can take custody of the child with no issue in Iran. As discussed in the previous chapter, in fact even the paternal grandfather has precedent over the mother. By taking her child, not only is Sara standing up to Hessam, but she is also standing up to the patriarchal system ruling the country. This way she has more agency.

There is another issue as well that Mehrjui may have considered when deciding to end the film this way, and which comes up in the film *Ten* (2001) discussed in the next chapter. It is the expectation of society for a mother. A mother is expected to sacrifice everything for her child. So if Sara had left without her child it would make her *selfish* and therefore a bad mother, and this would have defied all that she has fought to gain.

Mobility

Besides the thematic similarity of the absent male figure, these three films are all the story of a woman who wanted voice and mobility and who succeeded in establishing and allocating her own space, the story of an absence who strove to become presence.

Farzaneh Milani, focusing on the place and the role of women in Iranian literature, considers the mobility of women in the public sphere to be the most fundamental agent of the feminine literary modernism of the past fifty years. She draws attention to the aesthetics of immobility, such as wrapped Chinese feet and their equivalents in other cultures and traditional societies that meant feminine virtue or beauty, and argues that mobility is the first condition of modernity. She contends that over the past five decades, Iranian female writers have revolutionized the literary tradition in Iran by creating characters who physically entered into traditionally male-dominated public spheres.³⁰⁶ Adding to this argument, Pouran Derakhshandeh also draws attention to the unprecedented and impatient mobility of the contemporary Iranian women who occupy 43% of the job market and represent over 60% of the postgraduate students.³⁰⁷

Beizai breaks the boundary of feminine mobility in *Bashu, the Little Stranger*. He selects the rural setting of a village with a boundless horizon of fields and lets Na'i loose in the fields. She represents a farmer woman in a rural northern village, her life demands her running, jumping, and fishing in the absence of her husband. Therefore her daily routine gives her infinite opportunities for motion. This mobility that Na'i has within her realm is what makes her character unique. Iranian cinema has a history of clichéd female characters confined within preset environments such as home, work, and closed private spaces in general. In contrast, this film's boundless locations are quite

³⁰⁶ Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 4, 95, 238.

³⁰⁷ Derakhshandeh, First interview.

refreshing and liberating. It is very different; there are almost no interior shots. Even the interior shots are filmed from outside looking inside; the camera is hardly confined within four walls and it moves freely, the same as Na'i. Na'i's free-floating movement is coupled with her connection to nature and the wild. She talks to the animals and birds. In the morning scene while she is feeding the chickens, a big black bird is flying in a circle over her head in the sky singing. She looks up at the bird, imitating its warble, and then talks to him, saying if he wants food he needs to come down and get it, and that she does not have wings to go up there.

This sense of mobility is repeated in the two other films under study as well, although in different ways. In *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, Shirin has just arrived from abroad alone and at the beginning of the film the newlywed bride is going to go away on her own too. The sense of freedom that is depicted through these mobile women perhaps is what Milani argues as women entering the realm of the men. To emphasize this further, in the scene where Da'i's son-in-law is coming back, Nasrin Da'i's daughter has stayed home. Although this is justified by the fact their little daughter was asleep before he arrived, nevertheless Shirin has also gone to the airport to welcome him back, and she has traveled there on her own. Her independence and ability to undertake the same actions as Da'i puts her character in an equal standing with him.



Figure 59 *Sara*, Sara going to the Great Bazaar

In *Sara*, this sense of mobility is portrayed through the long walking shots throughout the film. Sara is never enclosed in one place for too long, she is constantly on the move and the camera follows her through all her adventures. Although in her

husband's eye she is a fragile "spoiled little woman," on her own she is ready to conquer the world. For instance, in the scene after she decides to return Goshtasb's money before its due date, she runs to the bridal dress shop she works for, which is located in the most male-dominated and traditional workplace in Tehran, *Baazar-e Bozorg* (the Great Bazaar). There she delivers the work she has done, and since the pay is not enough, she asks to sell an old garment that belonged to her grandmother to make up the rest of the money. However, her boss gives her money in advance for the jobs she will do (Figure 59).

On the Question of the Veil

Although the modesty law imposed the veil on all women at all times in public (as this is not required or worn in private spaces), many filmmakers found different artistic methods to get around the difficulty of depicting women in their domestic and private spaces. This section is going to bring some examples from each of the films under study that directly negotiate the issue of the veil in the cinematic medium.



Figure 60 *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, Shirin wearing *chador*

As was mentioned before, many directors chose rural settings as the backdrop for their films, which allowed them to portray women in their traditional regional clothing. The village setting not only eases the way the female character appears on screen (i.e. the clothing and the veiling) but she also “can be filmed constantly labouring outdoors, relieving the filmmaker from the awkward task of placing her in a

familial context where the veil is deemed unnecessary, even inappropriate.”³⁰⁸ *Bashu, the Little Stranger* is a good example of this method.

The Scent of Joseph's Shirt, on the other hand, portrays women in their urban settings. In fact, every woman in this film except Shirin, the protagonist, wears a *chador* (a full-body black veil that drapes over the head and is usually held under the chin by one hand). Shirin wears a headscarf and baggy clothes. Through her appearance the film differentiates between Shirin, who came from abroad, and the female characters living in Iran. In the scene where Shirin and Da'i visit Khosrow's friend who had just returned home, when they get out of the car, Shirin takes a black *chador* out of her bag and puts it on. Witnessing this, Da'i looks at her with approval and utters “well done.” Although this scene may seem like propaganda, giving more value to a certain type of *hijab*, it can also be read differently. It is a unique scene portraying the two different modes of *hijab* that are accepted by the government and by the people. This scene portrays Shirin's respect for the religious people she is visiting (Figure 60).

It should be addressed here that censorship and limitations are not only for some people within the society. In the same way that the liberal and secular people feel silenced because they are not represented properly in a medium such as cinema, the more religious are also not free of scrutiny. This time they are marginalized and

³⁰⁸ Mottahedeh, “Where are Kiarostami's women?”, 311.



Figure 61 *The Scent of Joseph's Shirt*, Veiling the intimacy scene

antagonized in the films made by the more secular filmmakers.³⁰⁹ The fact there is no freedom of expression means that all types of people and beliefs are under oppression, not just the more liberal ones.

³⁰⁹ This is best addressed in Asghar Farhadi's films, both *Fireworks Wednesday* (discussed in the next chapter) and his latest film *Jodayi-e Simin va Nader* (*A Separation*, 2011). Farhadi's films usually address class differences. In the later film there is an interesting dialogue between the working-class more pious (conservative) character and the middle-class secular (liberal) character. They sum up the wrong perceptions each group has of the other. The religious character thinks that God only listens and belongs

In the scene when Da'i and Shirin are sitting in the living room with many other visitors of the returned POW, his sister arrives. Implying she has not seen him yet, their first reaction is to embrace one another. As compliance with the modesty codes won't allow physical interactions of unrelated men and women (or unrelated actors and actresses) on screen, Hatamikia employs a different kind of veiling to portray this reuniting. When she arrives, the brother and sister go into a private room that is partitioned with a curtain so that their shadows are still visible. Behind the curtain the hugging and kissing is portrayed (which, since we cannot see their faces, could be anyone, so in this way he avoids breaking the law). Then a bit later, when they have calmed down, the curtain is drawn away slightly and the brother and sister are revealed behind the veil sitting apart (Figure 61).

to them, and the secular character assumes the conservative man is constantly beating up his wife and
oppressing her.



Figure 62 *Sara*, Sara getting ready

In *Sara*, Mehrjui employs a detailed montage sequence to portray a scene that is most likely omitted in most Iranian films to avoid dealing with censorship issues, and

that is a woman dressing. This film follows Sara everywhere throughout a day. She is even depicted fallen sleep, so it is only natural to see her get ready to go out as well. Mehrjui not only does not avoid this, but he depicts it a few times (Figure 62).

Conclusion

This chapter looked at the trope of the absent men and the agency it brought for the women involved. The authority and independence that is bestowed on these women due to their men being at war or ill was contingent on their absence. What these films show was that although these women go through a hard time to work everything out on their own, this does not mean they are willing to give up their position as soon as the men are back (physically or metaphorically). This leads the study to its next step, which is one of total awareness concerning representations of women. In the next phase the women do not need to be put in a position to try independence, like the women in these films, but instead are all aware of what they want and will ask if they are not given what they deserve. The women in the next set of films still deal with the same issues as marriage and family life and the patriarchal society, but what is different is that all these films now focus on the moment of break. All the films start with the women already possessing agency. Ending this chapter with Sara is appropriate because the next films pick up the story from around the same point of departure.

Chapter 6: Girls Gone Wise: Women, Rebellion, and Liberation

Introduction

This chapter looks at the final phase of the women's journey of self-realization. The portrayal of women in films has come a long way, as those discussed in the previous chapters have demonstrated. The films in this chapter are the outcome of the work of many (including filmmakers, policy makers, and crews) who strived over the years to produce films that depict more nuanced female characters. When the shift towards women's cinema started in the 1990s, the female filmmakers were the pioneering directors who started tackling taboo subjects. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 4, throughout this journey the only consistent figures continuously producing women-

centered films have been the female filmmakers, especially Bani-Etemad and Milani. Their efforts were accompanied by those of other directors in the 1990s such as Mehrjui and Hatamikia, whose works were discussed in Chapter 5.

This chapter looks at three films that were produced in the years post-2000. Two of the films are from the younger generation of filmmakers, who started their careers after the year 2000 — a decade after the production of *Nargess*, which this study considers as the point of departure for a fuller representation of women in Iranian cinema. One is Asghar Farhadi's *Chaharshanbe Suri* (*Fireworks Wednesday*, 2006) and the other is Seyyed Reza Mir Karimi's *Be Hamin Sadegi* (*As Simple as That*, 2008). The other film this chapter looks at is *Dah* (*Ten*, 2001), the first of the female-centric films by the most famous Iranian director, Abbas Kiarostami.

Kiarostami, who has made some of the most celebrated Iranian films (both nationally and internationally), not only never made a female-centric film until *Ten*, but central female characters were in fact mostly missing from the films he made in the 1980s and 1990s. He has admitted himself that he avoided depicting women in most of his films because he couldn't portray them the way they would realistically be within their private realm.³¹⁰ This raises the question of what happened to change his mind, as most of his films after *Ten* are focused on female subjects. Mottahedeh observes this shift in Kiarostami's latest films and says, "Though Kiarostami himself admits that he avoids themes that demand close interaction between men and women in order to evade

³¹⁰ Mottahedeh, "Where are Kiarostami's women?", 5.

the issue of censorship, his latest film, the most popularly acclaimed in the West, seems to pay significant attention to the ways in which the demands placed on the representation of women in the Iranian context affect the formal components of representation in cinema.”³¹¹ Although he does not employ a conventional method of filmmaking in these female-centric films (this is fully addressed later in this chapter), the fact that he does turn to female subjects in the 2000s is perhaps a result of the shift that Iranian cinema underwent in the 1990s.

The same is also true with regards to the younger filmmakers Mir Karimi and Farhadi. To the question of why he decided to make a film like *As Simple as That* (depicting a day in life of a housewife), Mir Karimi responded that, firstly, he believes cinema educates people and women’s issues need to be addressed more in films to help shift society’s opinion gradually, and secondly, he looked at it as a challenge, especially for a male director. He also added that in the research process he learned a lot about what goes on in women’s minds, which made him more eager to make the film.³¹² Farhadi has always chosen female-centric subjects for his films, which mostly address different family, marriage, and domestic issues.

³¹¹ Ibid., 313.

³¹² Seyyed Reza Mir Karimi, Personal Interview, January 2009. (Edinburgh, Scotland). I programmed the 2009 Middle Eastern Film Festival at the Filmhouse, Edinburgh. Mir Karimi was our special guest and opened the festival with his film *As Simple as That*.

Kiarostami is by far the most celebrated and most viewed Iranian filmmaker nationally and internationally. This chapter will only address what is relevant to the argument of this thesis and will not reiterate the full body of existing scholarship on him and his work. For this chapter it will suffice to consider comments on Iranian cinema that are reflective of Kiarostami's films (or films that are produced in a similar style to his works, such as those by Majid Majidi and Jafar Panahi, and even to some extent works by Bahman Ghobadi). For instance, Mulvey describes New Iranian cinema by saying it "shrinks in scope and expands in time, moving away from dramatic plot, action or romance into scaled-down events and locations-based stories of great simplicity."³¹³ All this best explains the great works of Kiarostami, such as his famous *Koker* trilogy and *Ta'meh Guilass* (*Taste of Cherry*, 1997), which won him the Palme d'Or in the Cannes film festival.

Familiar with advanced technologies, Kiarostami was one of the first filmmakers in Iran to employ a digital camera to make a feature-length film. He is quite interested in experimental approaches to making films, and in recent years he has also turned to new media installation work. In 2001 he presented a video installation, *Sleepers*, at the Venice Biennale that depicted a young couple sleeping. Kiarostami taped a sleeping young couple and projected their life-size image for 100 minutes on a bed with pillows

³¹³ Mulvey, afterword to *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, 259.

and sheets in an actual room. The ambient sound also played, accompanying the image. The early morning or late afternoon change of lighting on the semi-exposed bodies is one of the most significant elements of this video installation (Figure 63).



Figure 63 Abbas Kiarostami, *Sleepers* (still) 2001

“V́ctor Erice / Abbas Kiarostami: Correspondences” Centre Pompidou

Kiarostami also has many documentaries to his credit and his stylistic approach in *Ten* is reminiscent of some of these early candid camera documentaries, such as *Hamshahri* (*Fellow Citizen*, 1983) and *Avaliha* (*First Graders*, 1984). In *Fellow Citizens*, he hid a camera in a parked car near a junction at the start of the limited traffic zone, focusing on a traffic warden stopping cars trying to cross without a permit. What

this short documentary shows is the different reasons people give the warden to enter the zone without a permit. What is interesting and somewhat bleak about this film is how many people resort to a lie to gain access to the zone. Most of the people give the warden a medical emergency excuse, since minutes into the zone there is a central hospital. In *The First Graders*, he installed a hidden camera filming the experience of the first day of school at a boy's primary.

Ten shows markers of his minimalist approach, but is a unique film in its production and style. Although not a documentary, it shares many of the characteristics of one. This film consists of ten scenes all within a moving car, depicting the same driver (the female protagonist) and her passengers. The camera only takes two positions throughout the film, depicting an indirect angle of the subjects. The camera looks at one character at a time; there are no two shots or conventional reverse shots depicting the character's point of view. The camera, mounted on the front hood of the car, is either pointing at the driver Mani or at whoever is sitting in the passenger seat. Although the situation must have restricted the positioning of the camera, it is obvious that Kiarostami has selected a non-subjective camera angle on purpose. There is only one shot in the entire film that employs a subjective angle. In Scene 7, the passenger seat is taken by a prostitute, who is never depicted in the same manner as the other passengers. When she gets out of the car, the film cuts to a shot of her leaving from Mani's point of view.

Although Kiarostami scripted the film, the actors must have also improvised a lot. The takes are long, there are few cuts, and there are not many edits in each scene besides occasional switches from Mani to the passengers. Before each scene, the crudely built countdown in Final Cut Pro is depicted, counting down the scenes from ten to zero. Using this countdown along with some jump cuts in each scene gives a sense of roughness to the film, as if it is not the final cut. It is heavy on dialogue throughout, but there are some breathing moments in which the characters sit in silence. These moments of silence seem as if the camera has been left on after a take and captures the actors off guard. A significant example is when Mani's sister is the passenger, and Mani leaves her in the car for a couple of minutes to pick up something from the bakery. While waiting, the actress plays with a cold sore on her face, fixes her scarf, bites on her nail and fidgets in a way as if she thinks no one is watching her. This lack of finesse or final polish gives the film a sense of immediacy and closeness to the viewer, as if the film and its subjects are naked, exposed.

The location of the film, the car, is what makes the film unique in its presentation. Kiarostami, who had claimed he avoided female subjects because he couldn't depict them in their private lives the way they would really be, managed to overcome the issue of depicting women in private versus public space in this film. In contrast to being framed within a cinematic frame that takes away the privacy of the subjects (meaning that all subjects would have to be depicted as if they are in a public space), being enclosed within the four walls of a car gives the passengers some level of privacy. The car is considered a public space and therefore the dress of all the women

depicted in the car has to comply with the public modesty laws in Iran. However, because they are enclosed in the car they are given privacy for what is exchanged verbally. Through this juxtaposition and by creating a private space within the public space, Kiarostami managed to depict women while avoiding depicting them in a private space that would require them not to wear *hijab*.



Figure 64 *Ten*, Scene one

Mani is an artist and a young mother who has divorced and married another man. In four out of the ten scenes her son, Amin, is the passenger (Scenes 10, 5, 3 and 1). The film starts with the shot on the passenger seat as Amin gets in. As soon as he gets into the car they start a quarrel over the choices Mani has made in her life to divorce and remarry. The camera stays with Amin for the first sixteen and half minutes of the film. The audiences' introduction to the protagonist is through her voice. Within these sixteen minutes Mani's problems and issues are all raised, and because she is not shown, the film conveys the message that she is a symbol of every woman. This first scene ends with Amin leaving the car angrily, and then the camera stays on Mani driving in silence for a short while (Figure 64).

This film addresses many women's issues, including problems of marriage, divorce, child custody, prostitution, and even piety. Amin, an 8-year-old boy who uses bad language and speaks in a very rude tone to his mother, puts Mani down in the first scene in a way that is beyond his age. It is almost as if he is repeating all the phrases that he had heard in previous quarrels between his mother and father. Amin, who is unhappy with living with a stepfather, prefers to live with his father. In the first scene Mani is trying to resist this need of his.

Mani tries to reason with Amin like an adult, and tries to make him understand and perhaps to grow up into a man who is more understanding of women's needs. Amin, the surrogate authoritative man, then accuses her of being selfish and only thinking of herself regarding the happiness in her new life. She responds, "I feel fulfilled now, like a flowing river. I was a stagnant pond. My brain was devastated." Later in their conversation it becomes apparent that she told the judge that her husband had been using drugs, and Amin is angry with her for that. Mani simply responds, "It was a good way of getting a divorce. The rotten laws in this society of ours give no rights to women. To get a divorce, a woman has to say that she is beaten or that her husband's on drugs." This short comment simply raises the question of women's rights, especially when it comes to family law.



Figure 65 *Ten*, One of the last scenes with Amin

This introductory scene sets the whole dynamic of the film. While Mani is going through the consequences of her actions in taking charge of her life, her other passengers also bring other related issues to the car. The car and its passengers is a microcosm of Iranian society; what is interesting is that the male representative in this society is a child. The only other male presence is the father, depicted in the last two scenes with Amin through the side window of the driver's door; he is in his car, which

is parked facing opposite Mani's car when they are at the meeting point to transfer Amin to one another (Figure 65).



Figure 66 *Ten*, Scene 3 with Mani's sister

In Scene 2, Mani is with her sister. They are in a conversation about Amin and his father (Figure 66). The sister believes she should let him live with his father because he needs a male rolemodel in his life. Mani's sister believes that one day, when Amin is older, he will realize that she is a good mother and he will be back, implying that the father's behaviour is also not ideal. She then adds, "At this age he needs his father," although it is not clear from their conversation in that scene whether Mani accepts this or



Figure 67 *Ten*, Final scene

not. The later scenes with Amin indicate she has and now he lives with his father most of the time. The four scenes with Amin depict progress in the mother-and-son relationship. While they fight aggressively in the first encounter, they are calmer in the subsequent meetings. It shows that finally they have both accepted some of each other's terms. Mani has let Amin stay with his father; when they meet she doesn't make him to go to her house. Instead they go to her mother's house and he is much calmer and uses less aggressive language. The final scene of the film is very short and sweet. Mani is at the usual meeting place. While Amin is crossing the road to get in to the car, Mani asks the father if he can stay the night or not. When Amin gets in he says calmly, "Take me to grandma's," and Mani replies, "Sure dear" (Figure 67).

In the scene after her sister gets out, Mani is lost and asks an old lady if the road she is on is a dead-end or not. The old lady helps her and Mani offers to give her a lift. She is going to Imamzadeh Ali Akbar (the mausoleum of Ali Akbar). The camera does not show this old lady aside from when Mani is talking to her to get directions and then at the end of the journey when she is getting out, cutting from Mani to her back leaving the shot (Figure 68). This old lady has put everything she has into her faith. She has even sold her house to go on a pilgrimage to Syria and now she walks up a hill three times a day to this mausoleum to pray. Mani asks if her prayers are granted or not, and the old lady says no prayer is left without answer. The old lady even suggests she would sit and watch the car if Mani would like to go in to pay her respects and pray. Mani refuses this offer very politely, without saying she doesn't believe



Figure 68 *Ten*, The scene with the old lady going to Imamzadeh Ali Akbar

The next scene is at night and the passenger is already in the car. Soon it is clear that Mani has paused by the side of a road and a prostitute, who had not noticed the driver is a woman, has gotten in. The lighting in the whole scene is quite dark and the camera stays on Mani throughout. The prostitute asks to get out because she is worried she may get too far from her base. Mani, who is interested to know why she does the job that she does, asks her to imagine she is a man and have a conversation with her. The prostitute laughs and says that is crazy, then pauses, adding, “I’m not working in

that field yet.” She continues laughing provocatively, “There is nothing I can do for you...”

Mani insists and asks her why she does what she does. She replies, “Sex, love, sex...” and she laughs. Whatever Mani says the prostitute turns it to a sexual comment. Mani says, “You see everything sexually.” She responds, “You’re the one who focuses on the sex, we don’t see the sex in it.” To the question of whether she ever feels guilty or sinful she laughs and does not reply.

The prostitute says that mostly, while they are in bed, the wives call their husbands. The latter always reply with “sweetheart,” give a phony reason as to why they are not home yet, and end with “I love you too.” Then the prostitute says, “You’re an idiot and I’m smart.” Mani finds this interesting and asks why.

The prostitute

“You see, it’s like... it’s give and take. You think it’s not the same for you? Who bought you that necklace?”

Mani

“It’s fake, I’m not too keen on jewellery.”

The prostitute

“Who bought it for you?”

Mani

“My husband.”

The prostitute

“You see, and that night he gave you...”

Mani

“You’re saying that life is all trade?”

The prostitute

“...but you have give and take too. You’re the wholesaler and we are the retailers.” (She laughs)

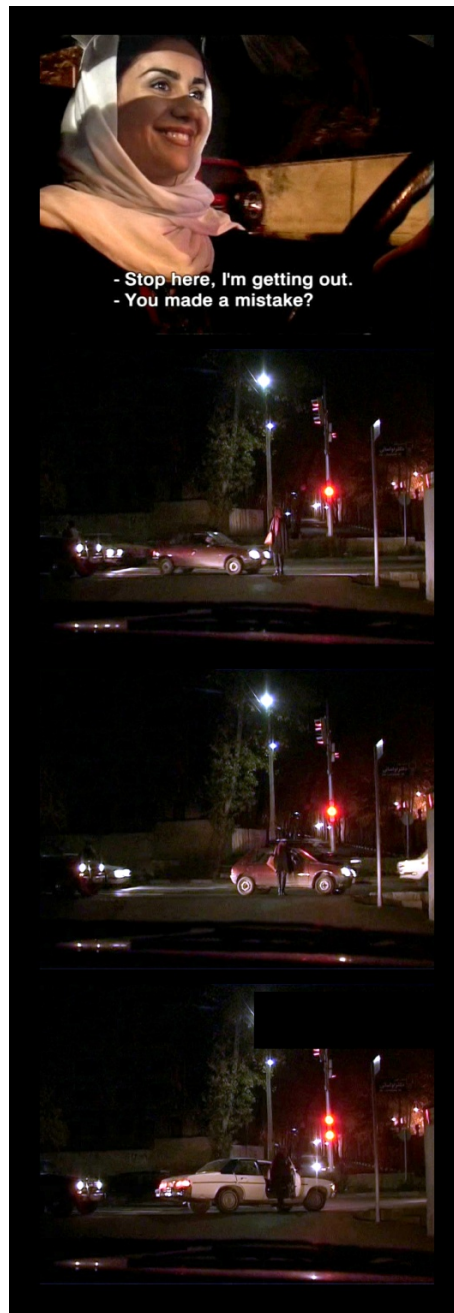


Figure 69 *Ten*, Scene 7 Mani with the prostitute

The “prostitute” persona who disappeared from Iranian cinema after the revolution reappeared clearly in this film for the first time. Here the persona is portrayed as a shadow, never really shown on camera; nevertheless, she sounds happy with her profession.³¹⁴ Indeed, this invisible shadow has a voice. She challenges the institution of marriage and criticizes married men. To her, there is no difference between her role as a “prostitute” and that of a wife when it comes to sex.

Then the prostitute asks Mani to let her out somewhere she thinks is also a good spot. When she gets out, the film cuts to a subjective camera angle showing her walking to the side of the road. The first car stops, she bends and talks to the driver. That car leaves but she gets into the next car that pulls over (Figure 69).

In the next scene, Mani is depicted with a girl she has just picked up from in front of the same mausoleum to which she had taken the old lady. From the conversation it is revealed that Mani has in fact gone there too a couple of times looking for peace of mind, although she does not know whether it worked or not. Mani starts complaining about the fact that the other day she could go without a *chador* (the usually black veil that drapes over the whole body) and today they did not let her in because she was not wearing one. The girl mentions that she brings her own *chador* in a bag and wears it there. Mani is also wearing a black scarf, which is perhaps her way of trying to be modest when going to a religious place.

³¹⁴ Gonul Donmez-Colin, *The Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 242.



Figure 70 *Ten*. Scene 6 Mani and the girl from the mausoleum

The girl goes to the mausoleum to pray in the hope of marrying the man she loves. She finds him conflicted at heart so she prays he makes the right decision. She believes in fate too, which is why she is asking God to bring her the fate she thinks is good for her. What is very interesting in this scene is how Mani confesses her divorce to this stranger. While she is very open about it when talking to her son or sister, when she wants to tell this girl she almost mumbles and quickly changes the subject. This very much shows society's perception of a divorced woman that even she herself is not at ease to admit it. The girl's reaction also confirms it; she stays quiet and does not say anything for a while (Figure 70).



Figure 71 *Ten*, Scene 4 Mani and a friend

In Scene 4, Mani is in the car with a female friend going to have dinner. The friend is crying and is very sad because her boyfriend of seven years has left her. Through her depressed comments it is implied she has lost her virginity after seven years, and feels she is ruined. Mani, who does not understand her despair, tries to calm her down. However, it does not work and Mani gets angry and starts complaining about the society that is forcing women to define themselves through someone else, a man, and the fact that she has to do whatever pleases the men. She talks about her instructor at the gym who told them to do particular exercises to help enlarge their breasts and bottom because that is what men like. Then she tells her friend to forget the boyfriend, as he is probably having fun while she is still crying for him (Figure 71).

Scene 2 is once again the girl from the mausoleum. She says she has not been to the mausoleum much lately, because she was not feeling good. Then she mentions that the man she wanted to marry, after all this time, is thinking of someone else and has left her. Mani asks her why she has tied her scarf so modestly. The girl moves her scarf back, revealing that she has shaved her head completely. She says everything changes in her life, so she needed to change something and has shaved her head in protest. Mani stops the car. It is a bonding moment between the two. The girl starts to cry, Mani asks her why she is crying and the girl starts to laugh and says that she is both crying and laughing. Mani's hand comes into the frame, breaking the divide that has been there throughout the film, and wipes tears from the girl's face. Mani tells her that the shaved



Figure 72 *Ten*, Scene 2 Mani with the girl who has shaved her head

head suits her, asks why she is wearing a scarf, and then tells her to “Take it off” (Figure 72). In a few films in the early 2000s, women who had shaved their heads were allowed to not wear a scarf, as the Quran specifically commanded that women’s hair needs to be covered. Another example is in the film *Zendaneh Zanan* (*Women’s Prison*, 2002) by Manijeh Hekmat, in which a female prisoner protests against wearing her *hijab* all the time as it would not be hygienic. The warden threatens the prisoner that she will have to shave her head, which she accepts and therefore does not need to wear her scarf anymore. However, this is no longer acceptable and films will be banned if they depict women without scarves, regardless of whether their heads are shaved.

This film addresses many issues and leaves them for the audience to consider. It does not offer any solutions or conclusions to the majority of the problems raised; it is mostly like an informative series of events. In terms of the number of issues raised, one can compare this film with Jafar Panahi’s *Dayereh* (*Circle*, 2000), but the approach is quite different. They both depict a series of women struggling in a sexist, oppressive society. The difference is that women in Kiarostami’s film have a voice and agency that is moving them forward, just as the vehicle in this film is constantly moving forward, except for brief stops. In contrast, the women in Panahi’s film do not have an agency to lead them forward. They are full of resentment and stuck in a loop, as the title clearly suggests.

Chaharshanbe Suri (Fireworks Wednesday)

Asghar Farhadi started his career in cinema as a scriptwriter. He produced ten feature-length screenplays, of which he directed five. All his films have strong central female characters. He has won some of the most prestigious film awards in the world for his films. His final film *Jodayi-e Simin va Nader (A Separation, 2011)* won the Golden Bear for Best Film at the Berlin International Film Festival and won the Best Foreign Language Film category at the Oscars. The film this chapter is looking at, *Chaharshanbe Suri (Fireworks Wednesday, 2006)* won the Best Director, Best Actress, and Best Editing categories at Iran's Fajr International Film Festival, and won the prize for Best International Feature at the 42nd Chicago International Film Festival in 2006.

Fireworks Wednesday is an Iranian domestic drama that outlines the strains and emotional agonies of an urban couple in the course of a single day. The title refers to the evening before the last Wednesday of winter, which traditionally sets off the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) festivities that celebrate the beginning of spring and that last until two weeks after the New Year. Every year on that evening, Iranians jump over bonfires on the streets all over the city. This ritual is supposed to cleanse their spirit and prepare them for the New Year. It is an evening full of brightly lit fires and firecrackers.



Figure 73 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Roohi trying on the wedding dress

This film has three main female characters whose lives get tangled together in the course of this one day. Mozhdeh, a young woman, appears to be suspicious that her husband, Morteza, is having an affair. An ingénue, Roohi, works as a maid through a cleaning agency and is engaged to be married the following week. Simin, a single woman, lives next door to Mozhdeh and runs a beauty salon in her apartment. For the

most part the story unfolds through Roohi's point of view; only a couple of scenes are not narrated through her focalization.

On the morning of this day at the beginning of the film, Roohi is depicted on the back of her fiancé's motorcycle on the way to the cleaning agency where she works. The scene at the agency sets her innocent, happy, and hopeful character. She is in love, and her giggles convey her inner happiness. Since her wedding is in a few days, a colleague has brought her a wedding dress to try. She goes and puts on the dress in the toilet — a very grim place — but she does not seem to care (Figure 73). Then she is assigned to clean Mozhdeh and Morteza's house in uptown Tehran. She initially thinks that is too far, but her boss tells her that is the best shift he has so she takes a bus there.

This film is similar to Farhadi's other films in that he also critiques the class differences in a big city such as Tehran. His criticism is usually through how the upper-middle class sees the working class and vice versa. For instance, in this film, it is clearly shown in the scene in which Roohi arrives at Mozhdeh's house. The buzzer is not working, so Roohi rings their neighbour, Simin, and she tells her to wait while she makes a phone call to Mozhdeh's house to open the door for her. However, another neighbour arrives in the meantime and Roohi starts to walk in after her. The neighbour looks at her and asks, not in a very nice tone, where she is going. Roohi explains that she has come to work and that Mozhdeh's buzzer is not working. The neighbour says sorry but tells Roohi to wait outside until they come and open the door themselves. It may seem like the neighbour was trying to be protective of the building and who comes

and goes, but this is not very common in the culture. The common reaction would have been to let her in and guide her where to go. As soon as the neighbour closes the door, the buzzer opens it again for Roohi and she walks in. The film implies, through Roohi's facial expression, that the neighbour has refused her entry because, based on her clothing, Roohi does not belong there and cannot be a guest (Figure 74).



Figure 74 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Roohi and a neighbour's confrontation at the door

When Roohi walks into the house she is faced with chaos. It is true that everyone cleans their house before the New Year, but what she witnesses only a couple of days before New Year is unbelievable. The visual mess in the house hints at the disorder in which the family lives. Everything is covered with plastic covers as if they had just painted the house, and one of the main windows in the living room is broken. When Roohi arrives she sees that Morteza is on the phone with his colleague who is asking him to go to work that day. His hand is also dressed as if it is wounded. He asks her to wear slippers, as there is broken glass everywhere, and then she goes and starts to clean up the glass.

The details of what lies behind the couple's problems are revealed only gradually, through slow disclosure. After a while, it becomes clear that Mozhdeh is jealous of her husband's suspected infidelity with Simin, who lives and works in the next-door apartment. Roohi, fascinated as she is with romantic dreams about her upcoming marital bliss, is appalled to see how Morteza and Mozhdeh treat each other. Mozhdeh is temperamental and obsessively bad-tempered towards her husband. Morteza, in turn, is abrupt, rude, and insensitive towards his wife's worries, which he views as obsessive jealousy. The night before they had a heated quarrel and Morteza broke the window and cut his hand. They are supposed to leave on a trip to Dubai the next day.

Mozhdeh is shown as a suspicious and temperamental character, and is not happy that her husband has hired a strange maid from the agency. She usually asks the

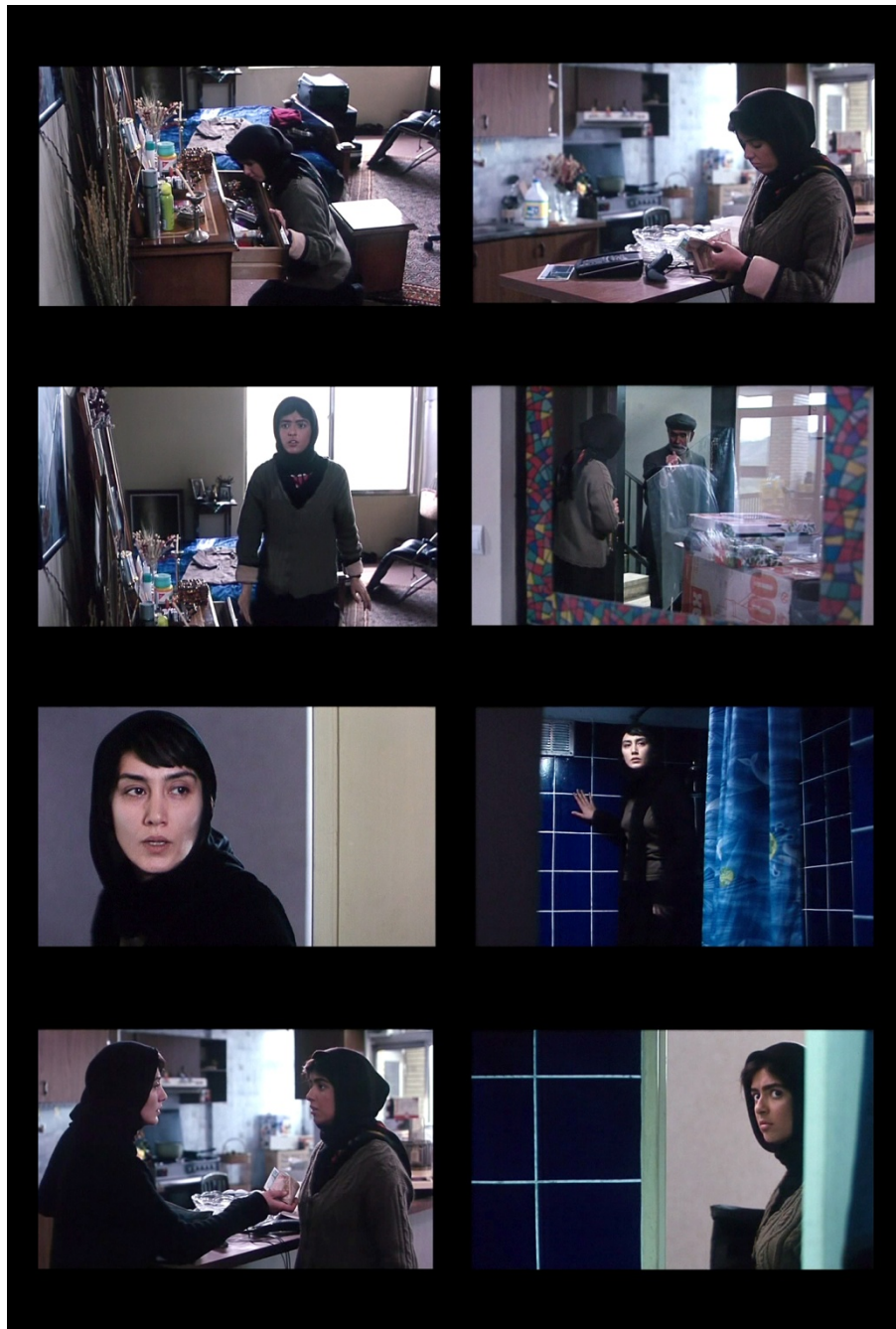


Figure 75 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Mozhdeh asks Roohi to leave

building manager's wife to help out. In an early scene, Mozhdeh finds the naïve Roohi going through her drawers. Roohi claims the drawer had come apart and she was trying

to fix it, but Mozhdeh asks her to leave and pays her a little money. When she is she is getting ready to go, a man arrives to fix the window. Roohi finds Mozhdeh in the bathroom next to the ventilation window. The scene implies that Mozhdeh regularly listens through the vents that are presumably shared with their next-door neighbour. Roohi's facial reaction speaks volumes and shows her disgust at Mozhdeh's actions (Figure 75).

Little by little, Roohi finds herself getting involved in the machinations of this couple's argument. Mozhdeh, who finds Simin's number on their answering machine, thinks her husband has lied, did not go to work, and instead had an appointment with Simin. She runs after Roohi and lures her into calling Simin and making a fake appointment for her eyebrows. Roohi's childish and naïve character actually enjoys this and plays the game. In this way Mozhdeh confirms that Simin is also busy at the same time as her husband (Figure 76).



Figure 76 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Roohi making an appointment for her eyebrows

Later, Mozhdeh finds out Roohi has not gone home because she actually wants to use the appointment to have her eyebrows done, and asks her back in. Roohi then asks if she can call her fiancé to ask for his permission to do her eyebrows, but

Mozhdeh and her sister, who is visiting, tell her she should surprise him.³¹⁵ After a little contemplation she agrees and decides not to ask him. In her world this is a huge independent step and she enjoys taking the risk (Figure 77).



Figure 77 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Roohi deciding not to let her fiancé know she is having her eyebrows done

There is only one scene that makes the viewer sympathize with Mozhdeh.

Throughout the film she has been portrayed as a character that is on an edge, does not

³¹⁵ Traditionally, unmarried girls do not shape their eyebrows and it is one of the visual changes in a bride when she shapes her eyebrows for the first time.

trust anyone and gets angry very quickly. Her sister, who has come to visit her and try to mend Mozhdeh's relationship with her husband, finds Mozhdeh spying on her neighbour in the bathroom. Mozhdeh tells her sister about her worries. However, her sister also takes her husband's side and this makes Mozhdeh cry and say, "He is my husband, how would you know... I wish dad was still alive." It is very interesting that she wished her other authoritative male figure was alive to support her in this situation. Throughout the film everyone wants to convince her she is wrong and her husband is innocent (Figure 78).



Figure 78 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Mozhdeh confiding in her sister



Figure 79 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Roohi having her eyebrows done

Roohi repeatedly and inadvertently makes innocent comments concerning what she has heard in separate conversations with Simin, Morteza, and Mozhdeh, and those comments trigger further quarrels. When she goes for her eyebrow shaping, she takes an obvious liking to Simin. Simin seems like a very gentle and kind woman, and she does

not charge Roohi for her eyebrows. This scene is quite interesting as it depicts a very feminine and private location, a beauty salon, into which men are usually not allowed and which, unsurprisingly, is not depicted in many Iranian films. When Simin is working on Roohi's face, the camera depicts it in such a way that the actual threading is never showed. In one shot Simin is depicted with the string around her neck and her hand is shown, but Roohi's head covers the action when she is actually working on her face. In the reverse shot, the camera is looking from a low angle and the beauty products block half of Roohi's face, and therefore again the action is not revealed. This mise en scene is very much in tune with what is going on in Roohi's head away from all the chaos around her. There is also a beautiful wedding dress hanging in the background, which adds a touch of innocence to the beautification act that is taking place in the foreground. As in any beauty salon, they chat and gossip while working. Roohi asks Simin about her New Year plans and whether she is going away. Simin replies she has no plans, but everyone around her is going somewhere, for instance the next-door neighbours are leaving for Dubai at four in the morning the next day (Figure 79).

Before Roohi leaves Simin, her landlord arrives without warning with a family to view the apartment. Simin is distressed and asks the landlord why he wants to rent the place to someone else and whether she has been a bad tenant. He replies saying he has no problems with her, but her neighbours have complained and he is not happy that she has started a business in the house. She asks who complained, and states that the other neighbours all have parties or fights and no one says anything. Roohi guesses

which neighbour must have complained. After the landlord has left she tells Simin that she thinks Mozhdeh must have complained, as she doesn't trust anyone. Simin asks how she knows and then adds that she does not think it was Mozhdeh, because they seem nice and she does not know them well (Figure 80).



Figure 80 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Roohi finds out about Simin's problems

When Roohi returns to Mozhdeh's apartment, she is so much in her own world that she unintentionally mentions the family does not have much time to get ready for

their four a.m. plane. Mozhdeh looks at her with surprise and then looks at their flight tickets, which are on the counter. Mozhdeh, who clearly didn't know when her flight was the next day, asks who told her. The naïve Roohi replies that Simin said so (Figure 81). For Mozhdeh, this confirms her husband's infidelity. Then she makes an excuse to



Figure 81 *Fireworks Wednesday*, When Roohi tells Mozhdeh their flight time

Roohi saying she is going to bed, and even asks her to pick up her son from school while she is asleep. Instead, Mozhdeh leaves the house, goes to where her husband

works, and takes Roohi's *chador* as well. The next scene is at Morteza's work. He is angry because a commercial they had made had not been approved. The character is a seven-year-girl without *hijab*, but the authorities said she looks older than nine, meaning they need to hide her hair somehow. A colleague suggests using photoshop. Morteza then looks out of the window and sees cars stopping for a woman in *chador*, as if she is a working lady. He recognizes her, runs down to the street, and starts beating her. She is then revealed to be Mozhdeh, disguising herself to find out whether her husband was really at work or not.

After the confrontation, Mozhdeh goes home and Morteza's friends bring him back into the office. His friend asks what he had done for his wife to be behaving in such a way. The friend does not accept that she has gone crazy; he insists that Morteza must have done something, but Morteza assures him that he has done nothing wrong. His friend criticizes him for having treated her in such a way publicly and does not agree with him or approve of his hot temper (Figure 82). What is very interesting in this scene is Mozhdeh's use of a *chador* for disguise. As mentioned, she has stolen Roohi's *chador*, but because she apparently does not know how to wear one and because of the fact that she stayed a long time in the same spot, many cars mistook her for a prostitute. The suggestion that prostitutes look similar to regular women and are readily available in the main streets of Tehran is another subtle criticism that this film offers. This film shows many women from different classes and different parts of Tehran, all with their different stories and dimensions. None of the women in this film is one-dimensional; this is the very difference that Iranian cinema has achieved since the 1990s.



Figure 82 *Fireworks Wednesday*, The beating scene in the street

When Morteza arrives home, Mozhdeh is ready to leave the house with her son. He pleads and says he is sorry and that he loves his family and his life with her. She then asks how the woman next door knows when their flight is when she does not. Right

when Morteza stays speechless, searching for an answer, Roohi intervenes. She jumps in and says Simin must have read the time when the tickets arrived with the courier. Roohi invents a story that, because their buzzer was not working, the courier gave the tickets to Simin and then she dropped the tickets off there. This lie works like cold water on a fire and cools everyone. It is not really clear why Roohi makes this story up, but we can assume it was because she did not think Simin was a bad woman and she found Mozhdah unstable and jealous.

After that, Morteza, who has promised to take his son to the park for the Fireworks Wednesday celebration, also offers Roohi a lift to the station. However, when they get to the park, he asks her to watch the boy while he goes to run some errands. She says it will get dark and she lives far away, he thanks her and offers to take her home himself. When he leaves, he first goes to a corner shop and buys some snacks and then he parks in a street and waits. In the next shot he wakes up with Simin entering the car, revealing that they are having an affair after all. In this scene he becomes a completely different person; he is sweet and charming and kind. However, Simin tells him that she wants to break up with him, because she knows how much this is destroying his wife. He gets angry and says after all that has happened she can't do this, "Now that everything is fixed." Simin is serious, and in a close-up as he tries to hold her hand she rejects him saying, "Don't touch me." Before she leaves they exchange some remarks about their New Year plans, he starts to smoke, and she lends him her lighter. (Roohi had previously tried to use that same lighter at Simin's; it is unique because



Figure 83 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Morteza and Simin meeting

when it lights it plays a tune.) Simin tells him to keep it as a memory. The scene ends with sadness of the two lovers separating (Figure 83).

This is one of the only examples of unfaithfulness depicted on screen in Iranian cinema that has not been sanctioned religiously through the declaration of *sigheh* (temporary marriage). Many films in the early 2000s, such as *Shokaran* (*Hemlock*, 2000), depict and criticize short-term and temporary marriages in Iran. They all are in fact trying to criticize unfaithful men who have an affair without their wives' knowledge. Because they cannot depict people, especially women, having an affair, they usually mention that the characters had a temporary marriage. This kind of covering of an otherwise illegal act in informal conversation is referred to as *kolah shar'i* (a legal cap), meaning to cover something illegal with a legal cap and thereby fix the problem. This same extra detail was mentioned by Afagh in *Nargess* in reference to her relationship with Abbas, making it acceptable for her to be having an affair with him.

By the time Morteza picks up Roohi and his son it is already dark. He says he will take the boy home and then drive her home. As soon as Roohi sits in the car she smells a perfume, which reminds her of the perfume she tried in Simin's house (Figure 79). This shocks her, and her suspicions are further confirmed seconds later, as Morteza uses Simin's lighter to light his cigarette. The seemingly unending happiness leaves Roohi's face, which now shows she feels guilty for having intervened earlier and protected Simin. The mise en scene of the rest of this scene is well presented; there is

very little dialogue but everyone communicates their feelings to one another. From the shadow of sorrow that was cast on Roohi's face, Morteza realizes she has noticed the truth. When they get home, he asks her to stay downstairs while he puts the boy to bed and comes back. While waiting by the door, she also witnesses Simin's ex-husband dropping off their daughter to see her mother for a couple of hours. Roohi no longer smiles or talks to Simin, but just looks at her almost with disbelief. Roohi sinks into her thoughts as she waits, and then decides to go upstairs. When she gets to their door, Mozhdeh, looking the calmest she has been depicted, is surprised that Morteza has not driven her home yet. Soon Morteza comes to the door and tells Roohi, "I told you to stay downstairs, I will be with you shortly." Mozhdeh looks at her face and asks her, "Did you want to say something?" All Roohi does is look at her, astounded. Then Morteza walks out and they leave (Figure 84).



Figure 84 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Roohi realizes the truth about the affair

On the way to Roohi's house, they stay mostly in silence. Right towards the end Morteza starts talking to her. He asks why she came upstairs at the end, thanks her for what she did earlier about the plane tickets, and asks her why she did it. Roohi replies, in an affirming voice, because she wanted to. Then Morteza repeats, "I wish you had

not come upstairs at the end, do you think my wife noticed?" They drive in silence again.



Figure 85 *Fireworks Wednesday*, Final scene

Roohi is going home without her *chador*, which had gone missing. When she gets near her destination, she asks Morteza to drop her off a bit further on and then she walks back to where her fiancé is waiting for her on his motorcycle. As soon as he sees her he asks, "Where is your *chador*?" to which she calmly replies, "I will tell you the

story, let's go." This accusing question though is soon forgotten when he sees her in the light and notices the change in her appearance. They exchange a few nice comments and smile. Before they leave, Morteza, who has turned around, pauses by them and talks to Roohi's fiancé, saying sorry that her *chador* was mistakenly taken by his wife and thanking her for all her hard work. Her fiancé, who finds him a very kind man, with surprise says, "He drove you all the way here?" Then they get on the motorcycle and leave. In a way, Morteza repaid Roohi's favour with his final act of intervention in her life, because losing a *chador* is a big deal for a pious person.

The final scene of the film is Morteza coming home and finding their bed empty. Mozhdah is sleeping next to her son, in his bed. He calls her to go to her bed but she pretends to be asleep. When he leaves the room she opens her eyes. It is quite clear that now that she is sure; she is sad but calm, as if there is nothing more to fight for. Morteza also feels that and lies down alone in their bed. It is quite apparent that this is the end of their marriage (Figure 85).

This film shows three women in three stages of life with regards to marriage: a girl who is very much in love and is looking forward to getting married; a woman who is trying to save her marriage, but everything has gone out of her hands and she is reacting angrily; and a woman who perhaps has passed both of those stages and now is alone. Simin's character is particularly interesting. While she should perhaps be disliked, the way Roohi dislikes her at the end of the film, she also makes the viewer sympathize with her. After realizing the effect her behavior has had and the fact that she

has brought unhappiness to someone else's life, she sacrifices the happiness she has gained through her relationship with Morteza. What is interesting is her independence and strength. Two days before the New Year she is going to be homeless, which will also probably affect her work, but she still manages to get her act together and release herself from this hopeless relationship. It is as if she wants to start the New Year afresh. How everything that she witnessed will affect Roohi and her future life is perhaps the biggest message of the film.

Be Hamin Sadegi (As Simple as That)

Seyyed Reza Mir Karimi's *Be Hamin Sadegi (As Simple as That, 2008)* is the last film this thesis looks at in detail. This visually simple and stunning film depicts a day in the life of a housewife who is looking for visibility and change in her marital life. The plot may suggest that the film is not so interesting, but there is a lot more going on in this woman's life than one may imagine. As well as being a man wanting to depict moments in a woman's life that he has never witnessed, Mir Karimi found this topic challenging because of the discouragement he received from his colleagues and fellow filmmakers. He pitched his idea to some of the great filmmakers in Iran, including Abbas Kiarostami and Ebrahim Hatamikia, and they collectively told him that it was artistic suicide. This only persuaded him to do a lot of research in order to make a film he could be proud of. For his research, he asked several female authors to write a short

story based on his plotline. He then used their insights, in addition to other interviews with different women, to write the screenplay of the film.³¹⁶

Mir Karimi, like Abbas Kiarostami, comes from a visual arts background. He has a degree in Graphic Design from the Fine Arts faculty of Tehran University. He pays a lot of attention to the visual composition of every shot in his films, and most are quite picturesque. He also cares a lot about the credit sequences in his films, which, in this case, was done by Abbas Kiarostami. Conveying the simplicity and transparency of the film, the sequence is a piece of paper shot from underneath while a hand on the other side writes the credits with a pencil.

Most of this film is set indoors except for three scenes in which the protagonist goes outside to run some errands. The protagonist, Tahereh, is a young married woman with two children — a girl about eight years old and a boy about six years old. Throughout the whole film, the camera stays with Tahereh. There are no scenes in which she is not present, the audience stays with her at all times. There are many close-ups in this film, and this keeps the viewer in very close proximity to Tahereh. The camera observes everything up-close, and records every thought and feeling that goes through Tahereh's mind.

³¹⁶ Seyyed Reza Mir Karimi, Personal Interview, January 2009, Edinburgh, Scotland.



Figure 86 *As Simple as That*, Different modes of *hijab* shown throughout the film

One of the first issues that had to be faced in this film was the necessity of complying with the modesty codes when depicting a female subject. However, Mir

Karimi not only was not restricted by these modesty codes, but he also played on their existence and employed different modes of veiling throughout the film. For instance, to overcome the fact that the protagonist needed to be wearing *hijab* at all times, he employed different modes of *hijab* depending on where she was, from the looser headscarf that was tied at the back of her head at home to a light-coloured *chador* when running quick errands near her home, to her fully covered formal outdoor attire of a black *chador*. The transition between these different modes is what conveys when she was in her own private space versus when she was in public (Figure 86).

Every time there is someone at the door Tahereh looks through the spyhole, fixes her *hijab*, and then opens the door. In one scene she had heated hair curlers for her neighbour who had recently moved in, and therefore she opens the door without checking because she assumes the person there would be the neighbour. However, when opening the door she finds her neighbour's husband, therefore she suddenly moves her headscarf forward, but because her hands are full her scarf is left in an awkward position (Figure 87).

Another interesting scene actually plays with the fact that unrelated men and women are not supposed to have physical contact onscreen. Tahereh's husband has sent the office courier to pick up some architectural plans from his home office. Before Tahereh opens the door to the courier she unties the scarf from the back of her neck and ties it in a modest fashion under her chin. When she brings the plans and offers them to



Figure 87 *As Simple as That*, Tahereh at the door with her neighbour

him, the courier pauses a second and asks her to put them down on the shoe shelf outside the door, implying he is worried he might make physical contact with her if he attempts to take them from her hand. She gives him a look, which is very interesting, and then quickly puts the plans down. From her abruptness it is evident that she disapproves of everything being interpreted sexually. This in fact is the same comment the prostitute character makes in *Ten* (Figure 88).



Figure 88 *As Simple as That*, The courier picking up the architectural plans

This film portrays Tahereh's inner conflict between who she wants to be and who she has become in her family's eyes. She is the perfect mother and wife, but she also wants to maintain her visibility as a person. She has a clean and orderly home and is well organized. She does all the household chores while contemplating her decision whether to leave her home. Through an answering machine message from her mother it

is revealed that Tahereh has called and asked to stay with them for a while. Although her mother would be happy to see her (they live in another city and therefore do not see each other often) she is also worried because it is not like Tahereh to leave home, especially when her children have school. Nevertheless, her mother sounds supportive of whatever decision she makes, and lets Tahereh know she can leave that night with her uncle, who has coincidentally come to Tehran for business.

Tahereh is struggling to be seen and acknowledged more by her husband and children. This day is also her wedding anniversary, and throughout the day she makes many plans for how to celebrate it with her husband. It is also evident that she thinks her husband might have forgotten it, but she still has hope until the last minute that he will remember. She is looking to be appreciated; a little nudge could make her change her mind and not leave. Most of her plans for the night do not quite work the way she would like. She buys a cake, of which her son and his friend eat half without her permission. She also goes to buy her husband a suit, which he needs for work, as a gift. However, she cannot get money from the bank because the cash machine eats her card after she tries her pin number a couple of times (Figure 89). It is revealed later at night that her husband had changed the password and forgotten to tell her.

There are many actions and conversations that show how little her children think of her because she is a woman at home. Her daughter, who is going on a school trip, calls her father's office and asks his secretary to check the weather for that weekend to see what she needs to pack, without consulting her mother. Although she spends all

evening with her mother she does not ask her to sign the permission note for the school trip. When her dad comes home at night she wakes up and asks him to sign it, undermining her mother's equal authority as a parent.

This is best demonstrated through her son Ali's behaviour. He is not happy either with his mother's religious attire (i.e. wearing the *chador*) or with the fact that she does not work. She takes him to his English class after school and on the way he asks her why she never wears her red scarf. She replies that it is thin and not suitable for the colder seasons. Then he asks her not to come into the institute and to let him go alone instead, conveying he feels embarrassed that she stays there while he is in class. Tahereh is offended but reacts calmly and says she has some business to see to that day and she will not be going in with him anyway. The shot in the bus also portrays the divide between generations visually. The distance that Ali feels from his mother is portrayed by the metal pole in the bus that is literally dividing their space. Then, when they get near the English institute, she stays on one side of the road watching him cross. Ali leaves her behind (where he believes she belongs) and goes to class. Although this can be also interpreted as the little boy wanting to seem independent, the conversation on the way back confirms otherwise. When she pick him up later, he asks his mother "What is your job?" and then he asks what the English word is for *housewife* and she does not know.



Figure 89 *As Simple as That*, Tahereh taking her son to English class

He continues, “I said it means a ‘house worker’ but the other boys say it means a ‘cook.’ Does it mean a ‘cook’?” He says this in a very annoyed manner. Although there is nothing wrong with the cooking profession, unfortunately in the culture it is not the most highly valued, and the schoolboys have used it in a derogatory fashion to bring down the housewives’ position. While the son wants to believe that a housewife has a job too, translating it as “house worker,” the environment around him is proving him wrong (Figure 89).

After she leaves her son at the English class, Tahereh visits an old neighbour and friend who used to live in the same building as them with her husband, but after her divorce they moved away. This friend is depicted as an independent woman who started her own business, a clothing boutique, after her divorce. She also has a daughter who that lives with her ex-husband’s family. She claims to be happy and doing well; what is fascinating is that she is wearing a red scarf. Minutes after the conversation with her son Tahereh visits a free-spirited and independent woman wearing a red scarf. Whether the director really meant for this comparison or not, this scene depicts Tahereh’s black veil as a cage in which she is trapped and the red scarf as a sign of freedom. The friend also passes a little judgment on her in the way she asks what Tahereh is up too, if she is still keeping fit, and if she is still involved with her extra-curricular activities, which implies she has extra time since she does not work. Tahereh then tells her friend she goes to poetry classes, which receives a raised eyebrow in response, conveying that she does not find that useful, followed by a rather sarcastic remark, “I guess that is nice” (Figure 89).



Figure 90 *As Simple as That*, Tahereh and her daughter in the kitchen

There are many visual clues through the day that show Tahereh is making sure everything will be fine if she leaves for a while. Before visiting her friend, she makes two extra keys to the house for the children so that they will each have their own. Also, after her daughter comes home from school she tries to teach her some things in the kitchen. Tahereh asks her daughter, Arezou, to get a pack of frozen sour grapes from the freezer. When Arezou opens the freezer she is shocked at how overstocked it is. She has

difficulty pulling out the sour grape pack and she ends up pulling half of the stuff out of the freezer and onto the kitchen floor. What is fascinating is that it is as if Tahereh had expected that to happen. She is not surprised; she continues her work and in a very calm voice asks Arezou to sort them based on the labels and then put them back. Arezou is surprised by Tahereh's calm reaction. A natural reaction would have been for Tahereh to go and help her, but she does not do that. This reveals her intention of wanting her daughter to know what is available in the freezer in case she is not there (Figure 90).

Tahereh's forgotten happiness is portrayed in two scenes through her children. There is a wedding upstairs the next day, and as soon as Arezou comes home she starts playing dress-up with the other children in the building, pretending to get ready for the wedding. She keeps hiding away in her room with her friends. In one scene Tahereh checks on them and sees their excitement through the doors. They are listening to Iranian pop music and dancing and singing along with the song. Tahereh's face lights up at seeing this, and she enjoys their happiness (Figure 91). This scene is followed by her checking up on her son, Ali. He is playing a war game and asks her to join in. Lying under the bed she is asked to shoot the toy enemies with a gun. She shoots really well and he cheers her on. This brings her back to her childhood in which her uncle used to let her shoot with his real gun. Both of her children work as surrogate bodies of her past happy life. She can actually physically participate in the shooting game in her son's room, but for the dancing and singing she can only be an observer. This makes the scene with the little girls quite interesting because at such a young age they can be depicted singing and dancing, but an adult woman cannot be portrayed doing either of

those actions. This method of using children as a proxy is often employed in Iranian cinema.



Figure 91 *As Simple as That*, Tahereh watching her daughter sing and dance

After the children are in bed and everything is in order, Tahereh manages to look after herself for a little while before her husband gets home. She changes, which is depicted through several shots of her selecting what she wants to wear, and then it cuts to her buttoning up her shirt, while her headscarf is loosely on her head. Mir Karimi has

managed to portray her changing into nicer clothes without breaking any modesty rules. Sitting by her chest of drawers she contemplates what else she needs to do. Perhaps she is thinking of a comment she had heard earlier in the elevator, when her new neighbour remarked that her eyebrows need shaping, which upset her. Then she starts putting on make-up. In a similar manner to the scene in the beauty salon in *Fireworks Wednesday*, the camera does not show her putting on make-up, she is instead portrayed from behind (Figure 92).

Tahereh wraps her gift (which is a shirt as she didn't have enough cash to buy him the suit). Then she pulls out a new set of sheets and changes the bedding, which hints at the intimacy to transpire between her and her husband. Finally, she goes and sits down on the couch, but her mind is full of questions, which makes her cry and destroy her make-up. As soon as she is in the bathroom washing her face, her husband arrives. He never notices that she has done so much for him — he is too caught up in his new promotion at work. He has even eaten dinner, but because he finds out she has waited for him he pretends he has not, but then he hardly touches his food. He only talks about his work. She even tries to talk to him about the fact that she is thinking about going home for a few days, but he does not hear her. She is absolutely invisible in his eyes.



Figure 92 *As Simple as That*, Tahereh getting ready for her husband

He has also bought a suit, which makes her sad because she wanted to buy him the suit as gift, but she manages to keep a smile on her face and asks him to try it on. This is a very intimate scene, hardly showing anything in comparison to American or

European films. The codes of modesty are not just applicable to women; men are not to be shown naked either. This shot uses the closet door as a veil for him to change



Figure 93 *As Simple as That*, Tahereh's husband tries on his new suit

behind, in front of his wife who is sitting on the bed looking at him and passing the clothes to him (Figure 93).

He never remembers it is their anniversary, despite a few clues. She has put out a photograph of themselves from their honeymoon and slid it under the mirror's frame in the bedroom. When trying his suit he does see the photograph and even makes a comment and asks when it was taken. But her telling the story of their honeymoon does not trigger him to remember the date. Later, when signing Arezou's letter of permission, he asks Tahereh what the date is. Tahereh says the date and looks at him thinking now he is going to remember, but he still does not. Having waited all day, preparing for the night with her husband, she does not receive the attention she had hoped for. And her husband, having worked all day, goes to bed quickly after the dinner he pretends to eat. A shot of Tahereh alone sitting with a tray of tea with two full cups speaks volumes about her position in her marriage (Figure 94). Not having managed to talk to her husband about it, she makes up her mind, calls her uncle, and arranges for her pick up.

She has been portrayed as a pious woman and a believer and because she was not sure whether she should leave or not, she tries a few times throughout the day to call a clergyman to take a reading of Quran, called an *estekhareth*,³¹⁷ to decide whether she should go. But she is not successful in getting through to the clergy.

³¹⁷ *Estekhareth* literally means "seeking" and is the act of "seeking goodness," asking for the best choice through interpretations of the Quranic verses. It is usually done by randomly opening the Quran and reading the verses therein. Based on the interpretations of those verses, many Qurans indicate on the top of each page that whether the proposed action is "good" or "bad." Jane Dammens McAuliffe, ed., *Estekhareth*, vol. 4 P-Sh. Of *The Encyclopedia of Quran* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), P. 179. Many religious people resort to this to make a final decision. They may do it themselves or, like the protagonist in this film, ask a religious figure to do it for them.



Figure 94 *As Simple as That*, Tahereh sitting alone with two cups of tea

Although she is depicted as invisible in her husband's and children's eyes, Tahereh is portrayed as a trustworthy and dependable woman in other people's eyes, especially those of her neighbours and her poetry teacher. Throughout the film, on several occasions her upstairs neighbour, whose young daughter is getting married, has come to ask for her opinion and advice on different matters. While waiting for her uncle to collect her, the neighbour knocks on her door again. Tahereh is surprised by the hour, and opens the door. The neighbour asks her to go with her to her house. Despite

Tahereh's resistance and admitting she is not feeling well, the neighbour insists, and explains her anxiety for her daughter's marriage as they go upstairs. The bride to be is very young and her mother is worried whether they made the right choice or not. She asks Tahereh to sit next to the *khoncheye aghd* (the traditional wedding throw that the bride and groom sit on one end of during the wedding ceremony). There is usually a mirror, a set of candlesticks, and a copy of Quran on this throw. When they sit down, the neighbour asks Tahereh to open the Quran, take a reading, and see whether the marriage is meant to go ahead or not. Tahereh asks why she should do that and the mother replies that she had thought all day about who would be most suitable, and she could not think of anyone more blessed and fortunate than Tahereh in her married life. This scene is quite ironic. Tahereh, standing on the verge of breaking up her marriage, is asked to decide the fate of a young girl who is just beginning her journey into married life. She does the reading with extreme sorrow in her face. The reading turns out to be good and positive, which brings a big smile to the mother's face. Then with even more questions in her head, Tahereh walks back to her apartment. The shot conveys her concentration on the matter by focusing on her wedding band. It cuts to her profile sitting in her living room, looking quite disheveled. The sound of a car engine is heard in the background, which perhaps implies that her ride is there.



Figure 95 *As Simple as That*, The final scene

Then suddenly her husband calls her from the bedroom. Tahereh, turning towards the room, replies, “Yes dear.” He asks, “Where are you?” She pauses for a second and then with melancholy replies, “I am just here.” While still in profile she takes a big breath and lies backwards, leaving the frame. These last few seconds of the film convey that she has changed her mind and is going to stay. What is also conveyed is that she makes that decision in spite of her real inner self. The manner in which she lies backwards resembles the position of a corpse in a coffin, which her life can be interpreted as being. It almost feels that with this final decision she buries herself alive (Figure 95).

What makes this film very important is its portrayal of the every-woman in Iranian society. She is not an upper-middle-class educated woman, like Mani in *Ten* and Mozhddeh in *Fireworks Wednesday*. Although she does not completely walk away from her life the way they did, she has started a dialogue that includes all women, not just women from a specific class or group or background. This film focuses on the majority of women, the housewives, and invites them to desire and ask for visibility in their families and then in society. In a way, this film turns a camera on a section of society that perhaps many have forgotten. Having actively portrayed women in films since the 1990s has made the production of a film such as this that targets a larger number of people possible.

Conclusion

Having looked at its history, this thesis has examined the evolution of Iranian cinema over the years. Most specifically, this evolution has affected the portrayal of women in films. Focusing on the shift in the representation of women, this study has highlighted several films that have demonstrated this change since the 1990s. Bringing examples from the long tradition of melodramas of the pre-revolution era, commonly known as *film farsi*, to examples from the first decade after the revolution, this study looked for underlying traces of change that then resulted in the general move of Iranian cinema towards more female-centric cinema in the 1990s.

The pre-revolutionary films were representations of a vivid saviour rescuing subculture, and tending to portray two basic female personas, *chaste* (innocent and good) and *unchaste* (corrupt, lost, and bad) with delimited functions. The *good guy* protagonist in most of these films, the *luti* character, protected the weak, the poor, and

women — more specifically, their *namus* (honour). As demonstrated through *Gheisar*, the *good* women characters in these films remained in the realm of the private and were the protégés of the *luti*. As portrayed through two scenes, the protégé often received the same visual treatment as the *bad* women characters, the difference being the *bad* women characters aware of being watched while the *good* women characters were not. They were both meant for the protagonist's — and therefore the audience's — spectacle and visual pleasure.

For decades there were only the two types of female characters in almost all genres of films produced in Iran. The naïve, chaste, and obedient women characters were not only confined to the love interest and young women characters in the films. They included mature mothers, young housewives, and shy sisters, who represented praiseworthy characters in those films. Mothers especially in these films were loyal, tolerant, obedient, forgiving, self-sacrificing, and almost always wore the chador as a sign of their piety, like the mother character in *Gheisar*.

Employing Mulvey's theory, Iranian films before the revolution present men as active, controlling subjects and treat women as passive objects of desire for men in both the story and in the audience. As Mulvey asserts, such films objectify women in relation to the "controlling male gaze," presenting the woman as the "spectacle" and the man as "bearer of the look." Men do the looking; women are there to be *looked at*.³¹⁸ But the films after the revolution, due to the implementations of modesty ruling and purging

³¹⁸ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 23-27.

Iranian cinema from the objectification of female subjects, at first resulted in the more idealized portrayal of women. The fact that cinema screen was considered public space, regardless of the subject projected on it, made the female characters in films to be presented as if they were in public, even if the film was set presumably in their private space. This caused the female characters to always be aware of being watched, as they are always depicted in their private space wearing public space attire, and therefore eliminated the possibility of the female character being the subject of a voyeuristic gaze. As Mulvey argues, the female audience can take two possible positions in relation to films: one is a masochistic identification with the female object of desire; the second is the transsexual identification with men.³¹⁹ This second position is dictated to the Iranian audience, as cinema is considered a public space regardless of the subject matter, and therefore subjects are portrayed with having at least one male spectator in mind at all times.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, cinema was taken under the flagship of the newly installed Islamic government and went through a series of transformations. The Islamization of the Iranian film industry and implementation of the new ideology in all aspects of life in Iran was not the easiest or smoothest procedure. Many filmmakers and other active participants in the industry were purged, and many fled the country after the revolution. This caused cinema to go into a state of limbo for about two years before again starting to produce feature films. As a result, the Iranian film industry as it existed

³¹⁹ Mulvey, *Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"*, 122-130.

before the revolution was demolished, and a new state-run industry took its place. Many fresh talents after the revolution joined the revived film industry and helped create the Iranian cinema known today.

This thesis, while trying not to see the Islamic revolution as a clean break between life before and after the revolution, acknowledges that it sheds light on some independent and smaller institutions alongside the mainstream cinema that continued their contribution to Iranian cinema after the revolution. In the existing scholarship on Iranian cinema, the ongoing efforts of some groups of trained and educated film crews who started their career in film before the revolution has been overlooked. This thesis has looked at the institution of Iranian cinema since the 1960s and traced some independent film institutions that were established before the revolution and that continued their work more prominently after the revolution. Among these institutions was the College of Television and Cinema, a film school based on the idea of creating a more meaningful and artistic cinema under the flagship of the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT). This institute has continued its work to this day under the title of University of IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting University). The independent institutions that were introduced in Chapter 2 all created a narrow stream of filmmakers and film crews that worked in spite of the dominant commercial film industry before the revolution. After the revolution, because the main film industry was uprooted, this narrow stream managed to take prominence. This educated group created the backbone of the Iranian film industry after the revolution. The first Iranian female filmmakers, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Poursan Derakhshandeh, are also among the

people who were educated in their fields before the revolution and had started their careers as documentary filmmakers with the NIRT and continued their work with IRIB. As it was discussed, due to the shifts in the structure of the film industry and society in general, these female filmmakers managed to enter the feature filmmaking arena in the late 1980s. The overall change in Iranian society and the institution of Iranian cinema after the revolution is one of the factors that facilitated the increase in visibility of women in Iranian society as a whole, and in the film industry in particular.

The Islamic Revolution and implementation of *hijab* and the codes of modesty triggered new censorship rules dealing with the presence of women and gender relations in the cinema, which eliminated the sexual commercialization of women in the movies through an accelerated cultural revolution. The effect of this change of policy on the representation of women was so that the *unchaste* woman character was completely removed from the screen, and all Iranian cinema was left with was a more idealized representation of the *good* women. Thanks to the efforts of many filmmakers and industry members, this changed over the years; as this study discerned, this change is most evident since the 1990s. This shift coincides with the increase of the number of female filmmakers who began to make female-centric films. Having looked at the body of works by the first three female filmmakers and comparing the gradual increase of agency and voice of their female subjects with the shift in the representation women in the entire body of Iranian cinema, this thesis has found the female filmmakers to be the leading pioneering effort in establishing this shift since the early 1990s.

Having considered the corpus of films by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Pouran Derakhshandeh, and Tahmineh Milani, this thesis has selected six films with central female characters by their contemporary male directors that follow the same progression. All of the films analyzed in detail show the gradual increase of agency in the female characters. This thesis has divided this shift in representation of female subjects in films since the pre-revolutionary era to films after the revolution and up to the present into four phases. These phases coincide with steps women have taken in their journey towards self-realizations in the past sixty years.

The four stages mapped in this study depict women from the moment of total submission to waking up and desiring agency to when they have achieved momentum and agency to the final stage of wanting more agency. The progress shown through these stages moves Iranian cinema from the sexual objectification of women in films and the set portrayals of women in circumscribed gendered roles to a more nuanced representation of female subjects. Although many of these films still depict women who are wives and mothers, they are trying to help those women move beyond their set responsibilities and declare them as more than just wives and mothers. That is why this thesis considers the place of female directors within the Iranian film industry as well as the representation of women in films. Because the notion of patriarchy is deep-rooted in Iranian culture, the more nuanced representation of women in films can only be a direct reflection of the women in society having gained a more prominent presence.

Marriage is a key theme in many female-centric films. Just as Mulvey asserts of

the marriage function, all of the films under study focus on a marriage, and one way or another all ask, “What next?”³²⁰ What is interesting is that most of these films actually include a wedding scene, usually of the main character or a secondary character, and they all function as a comparison to the dysfunctional marriage under criticism.

Nargess, *The Mare*, *The Scent of Joseph’s Shirt*, *Fireworks Wednesday*, and *As Simple as That* all incorporate a wedding in their narrative. *The Mare*, *Fireworks Wednesday*, and *As Simple as That* all raise the question of what awaits the bride on the other side of this ceremony. In *The Mare*, Golbuteh questions her unconventional marriage to an old man when watching a young couple marrying. *Fireworks Wednesday* raises the question of what Roohi learned from witnessing all the troubles in the marriage of Mozhddeh and Morteza, and whether something better is awaiting her after her marriage. This comparison is most evident in *As Simple as That*: Tahereh’s marriage is seen as being very happy, and the mother of the bride wishes her daughter to have a successful marriage like Tahereh’s.

Filmmakers utilized different artistic methods to overcome the obstacles that would limit them to only show passive women. One of these techniques, in spite of the film censorship laws after the revolution, was for many Iranian filmmakers to portray their narratives in villages rather than urban areas. In these films, they could “avoid the problem of dressing female characters, as rural women traditionally wear head scarves and large outer garments congruent with the Islamic dress code. They could also avoid more complex urban issues, which are subject to much sharper scrutiny by the

³²⁰ Ibid.

censors.”³²¹ This is most evident in such films as *The Mare* and *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, and many of Kiarostami’s films.

Mobility is yet another tool directors employed to portray their subjects’ freedom. Different directors have employed mobility in different manners: Baizai depicts Na’i moving freely through the endless rice fields; while Mehrjui shows the mobility of his character Sara through the use of the subjective camera angle and her pacing through the streets of the city. In many of the films, cars are used as instruments of rebellion. For instance, Tahmineh Milani has employed car and/or driving as a sign of freedom in some of her films. In *Two Women*, Fereshteh, coming from a traditional background, knows how to drive and even offers to give lessons to her friend Roya, who is coming from an open-minded urban family. It is through her ability to drive that Fereshteh also manages to escape her dangerous stalker. In *The Fifth Reaction*, Fereshteh also escapes her father-in-law, who was going to take custody of her children, in a car, running away across the country. The best example of all is of course Kiarostami’s *Ten*, which is all shot in a moving car. In some films, the lack of mobility is depicted and criticized. For instance, Mir Karimi, in *As Simple as That*, has added an extra visual clue that further describes Tahereh’s stagnant and trapped life. In one scene she is depicted sitting quite still while watching a fitness video depicting the moving instructor (Figure 96). Her longing eyes portray her desire for movement, but her physical body is placid and still.

³²¹ Akrami, “Cinema II: Feature Films,” 577.



Figure 96 *As Simple as That*, Fitness show on TV

The shift in the representation of women that this thesis is identifying is not unique to the films under examination; it is an occurrence in the whole body of work in Iranian cinema in the period under study, although it is more evident in some films than others. This study has also looked at different styles of films; it has not just looked at the famous films that have been the subject of many previous scholarly works on Iranian cinema, but also at films that have made little or no appearance in the scholarship on Iranian cinema until now. Through this juxtaposition, this thesis portrays a shift in the trend of filmmaking in all Iranians films since the 1990s.

Although I wish I could say that this trend, which was established in the early 1990s, is still alive and, since the films chosen in this study, is moving forward, unfortunately that is not the case. Iranian cinema has been going through another wave of strict censorship and change since 2005 with the conversion of a less conservative government to a hardliner government. While at the time of starting this project the beginning of this new shift was in sight, it was too early to make any assertions. But now, a few years having passed since then, the change is much more evident. Looking

at especially the commercial Iranian films that have been made in the past three years, one can see much resemblance to the melodramatic films made before the revolution. It almost seems that Iranian commercial cinema has made a backwards progression to the *film farsi* era.

The direction in which the film industry in Iran is currently going would be a perfect next step to follow this study. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to determine the factors that have caused this move towards purely entertaining and shallow films — the kind of films that are easily getting permission to film, while many prominent directors are not being allowed to make any films. I would like to add a few concluding comments that are the result of my observation and casual correspondence with some Iranian filmmakers within Iran. The situation of filmmaking in Iran has changed since 2009. As it is widely known, Jafar Panahi, one of the most celebrated Iranian directors, after his support of the opposing presidential candidate Mirhossein Mousavi and raising his voice on behalf of many other protestors, was sentenced to prison, and now, although “free,” he is not permitted to produce any new films for twenty years, and is also not allowed to leave the country. On the other side, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad also became the voice of opposition on behalf of Iranian artists and filmmakers in 2009; although she has not faced prison, she has not been able to make any films since either.

This suffocating atmosphere that is surrounding the Iranian film industry today is quite different from any other time, and is very far from the slight freedom the film industry had gained in the 1990s. The irony is that some of the films that are being

made today depict women with so much makeup and in clothing that would have not passed the censorship if they were made a decade ago. Yet these films are not depicting the well-rounded female characters that the films under study depicted, the same way the films before the revolution that were not bound by the codes of modesty were not able to depict women outside the two cliché characters of “good” and “bad.” However, the majority of films produced today employ very shallow plotlines, and some are direct remakes of some *film farsi* narratives. I do not mean to undermine the filmmakers who, despite the increased difficulties and stricter censorship, manage to make valuable films. For instance, Asghar Farhadi’s latest film *A Separation* (2011) is a fantastic example of the progress this thesis mapped and it fits all that this study has explored.

Having reached the end of this study, I can say that Iranian cinema moved towards a more female-centric cinema and perception in the early 1990s through the influence of a small group of filmmakers, and then later in the 1990s it became a universal practice, as the examples in Chapter 6 illustrate. However, it lost its dominance towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. But the trend had a good run of at least fifteen years, and many great films to its legacy.

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Actor, the (*Honar Pish*e, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1993)

Apple (*Sib*, Samira Makhmalbaf, 1997)

As Simple as That (*Be Hamin Sadegi*, Reza Mir Karimi, 2008)

Bashu, the Little Stranger (*Bashu Gharibeye Kuchak*, Bahram Baizai, 1986)

Beautiful City (*Shahre Ziba*, Asghar Farhadi, 2004)

Blue-veiled, the (*Roosari Abi*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 1994)

Bride, the (*Aroos*, Behruz Afkhami, 1992)

Canary Yellow (*Zard-e Ghanari*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 1988)

Candle in the Wind (*Shami Dar Bad*, Poursan Derakhshandeh, 2003)

Centralization (*Tamarkoz*, Rakhshsan Bani-Etemad, 1987)

Children of Heaven (*Bacheha-ye Aseman*, Majid Majidi, 1997)

Children of Divorce/ *Bachehaye Talagh* (Tahmineh Milani, 1989)

Chronicles of Victory (*Ravaayat-e Fath*, Morteza Avini, 1980-1988)

Circle, the (*Dayereh*, Jaffar Panahi, 2000)

Cow, the (*Gav*, Daryus Mehrjui, 1969)

Downpour (*Ragbar*, Bahram Beizai, 1972)

Eternal Children (*Bachehaye Abadi*, Poursan Derakhshandeh, 2007)

Fellow Citizen (Hamshahri, Abbas Kiarostami, 1983)

Fiddler on the Roof (Norman Jewison, 1971)

Fifth Reaction, the (*Vakonesh-e-Panjom*, Tahmineh Milani, 2003)

Fireworks Wednesday (*Charshanbe Soori*, Asghar Farhadi, 2006)

First Graders (Avaliha, Abbas Kiarostami, 1984)

Foreign Currency (*Pul-e Khareji*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 1989)

From Kaskheh to Rhein (*Az Karkhe ta Rhein*, Ebrahim Hatamikia, 1993)

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Girl in Sneakers, A (*Dokhtari Ba Kafshhaye Katani*, Rasoul Sadr Ameli, 2000)

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Hemlock, the (*shokaran*, Fereydun Jeyrani, 1999)

Hidden Half, the (*Nimeh-ye-Penhan*, Tahmineh Milani, 2001)

House is Black, The (*Khaneh Siah Ast*, Forugh Farrokhzad, 1962)

How Starry was My Night (*Che Por Setare Bud Shabam*, Naser Gholamrezai, 1976)

I'm Taraneh, 15 (*Man Taraneh 15 Sal daram*, Rasoul Sadr Ameli, 2003)

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Lady, the (*Banoo*, Daryush Mehrju, 1992)

Legend of Ah, the (*Afsaneh-ye Ah*, Tahmineh Milani, 1991)

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Little Bird of Happiness, the (*Paranedeh Koochak e khoshbakhti*, Pouran Derakhshandeh, 1988)

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Low Altitude (*Ertefae Past*, Ebrahim Hatamikia, 2002)

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Mare, the (*Madian*, Ali Zhekan, 1986)

Maylady, the (*Banuye Ordibehesht*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 1998)

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Nargess (*Nargess*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 1992)

Night of the Hunchback, the (*Shab-e-Ghuzi*, Farrokh Ghaffari, 1964)

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Through the Olive Trees (*Zire Darakhtan Zeyton*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1994)

Two Women (*Do Zan*, Tahmineh Milani, 2000)

Sara (*Sara*, Daryush Mehrjui, 1993)

Separation, A (*Jodayi-e-Nadar Az Simin*, Asghar Farhadi, 2011)

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Siavash in Persepolis (*Siavash dar Takht-e Jamshid*, Fereydun Rahnama, 1957)

Singin' in the Rain (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952)

South of the City (*Jonub-e Shahr*, Farrokh Ghaffari, 1958)

Taste of Cherry (*Ta'meh Guilass*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1997)

Ten (*Dah*, Abbas Kiarostami, 2002)

Two Women (*Do Zan*, Tahmineh Milani, 2000)

Under the Skin of the City (*Zir-e-Pust-e Shahr*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 2001)

Village Migrant into the City, the (*Mohojereen Roustai*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 1985)

Viridiana (*Luis* Buñuel, 1961)

Wet Dreams (*Royay-e Khis*, Pouran Derakhshandeh, 2005)

Where is the Friend's House? (*Khaneye doost kojast?*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1987)

Who Do You Show These Films To? (*In Filmha ra be Che Kasi Neshan Midahid?*, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, 1998)

Women's Prison (*Zendan-e Zanan*, Manijeh Hekmat, 2003)

